

## to be a wanderer, wandering

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/28155291) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/28155291>.

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Fandom:	<a href="#">Dream SMP</a> , <a href="#">Minecraft (Video Game)</a> , <a href="#">when can we get a proper dream smp fandom tag GD</a> , <a href="#">im not writing rpf yall</a>
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Character:	<a href="#">Dave   Technoblade</a> , <a href="#">TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Clay   Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Alexis   Quackity</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy</a> , <a href="#">Niki   Nihachu</a> , <a href="#">GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence</a> , <a href="#">Ghost Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Depression</a> , <a href="#">Piglin Hybrid Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Winged TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Winged Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Protective Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Soft Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade Has ADHD (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Sad TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Hurt TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Sick Character</a> , <a href="#">Serious Injuries</a> , <a href="#">Past Abuse</a> , <a href="#">Suicidal Thoughts</a> , <a href="#">Broken Bones</a> , <a href="#">Disordered Eating</a> , <a href="#">Hypothermia</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot and Technoblade and TommyInnit are Siblings</a> , <a href="#">Adoptive Parent Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade Hears Voices (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Mental Health Issues</a> , <a href="#">Self-Harm</a> , <a href="#">Self-Esteem Issues</a> , <a href="#">Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD</a> , <a href="#">Panic Attacks</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">oh man is this fic angst, slightly more than canon-typical violence and gore</a> , <a href="#">the occasional moment of fluff</a> , <a href="#">references to chronic pain</a> , <a href="#">Older Sibling Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">hes the oldest dont talk to me</a> , <a href="#">philza minecraft's questionable parenting decisions</a> , <a href="#">implied/referenced child abandonment/neglect</a> , <a href="#">he's trying his best</a> , <a href="#">welcome to jaybird's hyperfocus self indulgence fic. enjoy your stay</a> , <a href="#">Minecraft but IRL</a> , <a href="#">Non-Consensual Drug Use</a> , <a href="#">which sounds dark as fuck lmao</a> , <a href="#">attempted execution</a> , <a href="#">like in canon but more painful</a> , <a href="#">niki is a good friend</a> , <a href="#">niki+techno friendship pog :-)</a> , <a href="#">Villain Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">i mean. kind of</a> , <a href="#">tubbo is not doing well</a> , <a href="#">fundy and quackity are also highkey bad in this</a> , <a href="#">Near Death Experiences</a> , <a href="#">lots of subtle worldbuilding</a> , <a href="#">Sheep Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">it's subtle but it's there</a> , <a href="#">Winged Alexis   Quackity</a> , <a href="#">I need to stop adding tags</a> , <a href="#">Not Really Character Death</a> , <a href="#">ykyk</a> , <a href="#">Winged Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Underage Drinking</a> , <a href="#">Winged Niki   Nihachu</a> , <a href="#">me slapping wings on every character: i can do what i want</a> , <a href="#">Trans Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Trans Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Enderman-Ghast Hybrid Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Ghost Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">glatt pog</a>
Language:	<a href="#">English</a>
Series:	<a href="#">Part 1 of things that grow in the snow</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Purrsonal Picks</a> , <a href="#">MCYT Fic Rec</a> , <a href="#">faei c</a> , <a href="#">Completed stories I've read</a>

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Stats:

Published: 2021-01-06 Completed: 2021-04-21 Chapters: 21/21 Words: 119039

## to be a wanderer, wandering

by [hydrangeasheart](#)

### Summary

Tommy's feet drag in the snow.

It's so, so cold. He's so cold. His toes are freezing. His exposed shins feel like they've been cut open-- even the one that's bandaged. His wings have gone numb, which is almost, almost good, because now he can't feel the shifting, broken bones inside of the left one, just under feathers and muscle.

He doesn't know why he's still walking.

-

Or, Tommy leaves the exploded ruins of Logstedshire behind, and walks until he finds somewhere safe.

And things keep going from there.

(A canon-divergent AU, splitting off somewhere around when Tommy started hiding out below Techno's house.)

### Notes

i lost my author's notes and my tags when the page refreshed so im way too tired to rewrite it exactly aghhhhhh

anyway this au has lived rent free in my head for like a month and i cannot stop thinking abt it. i have sbi as family brainrot so there's a lot of there. it's basically all my hcs and backstory ideas slammed into a vague narrative.

i have like 26k of fic written for this au please help me

fic title from since i saw vienna and chapter title from jubilee line, both by wilbur soot

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

## a fate worse than dying

Tommy's feet drag in the snow.

It's so, so cold. He's so cold. His toes are freezing. His exposed shins feel like they've been cut open-- even the one that's bandaged. His wings have gone numb, which is almost, *almost* good, because now he can't feel the shifting, broken bones inside of the left one, just under feathers and muscle.

He doesn't know why he's still walking. He could just lay down and die. Dream probably wouldn't find him here. No one would, actually. He could just lay down under some spruce or out in a clearing and the snow could bury him. He could freeze to death and everyone would just see the message, not his body. They wouldn't even want to find him, they would be happier with him gone.

But he's still walking. He's had to resort to using a thick tree branch as a walking stick, so he doesn't fall. Between the numbness and the cold and his lack of balance from a broken wing, he feels like he's going to collapse at any moment.

*So cold.*

It's getting dark. With the sun up, it was miserable, but not impossible to get through the tundra. With the sun gone, it's not only colder, but there are also monsters.

His stomach twists at the first growl of a zombie.

He tries to hurry along faster, dragging his frozen feet through the snow and patchy undergrowth, avoiding bumping into trees as best as possible. He continues to rely on the branch, but it's easier to hurry with adrenaline in his system.

This is more terrifying than war. More terrifying than Dream's manipulation or even Wilbur's madness. Because out here, death won't be swift, like it would be to another person's hand.

He'll die slowly to the infection of zombie bites. Or arrows piercing his skin from the strays that roam the snow. Or a spider will entangle him in webs and eat him alive.

*So cold...*

He struggles a little further, balancing forward on the branch. There's a break in the trees, up ahead.

And there's light. He doesn't care what it is-- hell, he'd run right into fucking *Schlatt's* arms if the man was there, because light means warmth and he's so, so, *so* cold. And, what the fuck, why not admit it, Schlatt looked oddly huggable in his life. Tommy's on the verge of freezing to death, he can admit that hugging the ram-man would probably be infinitely preferable to this.

(He was Tubbo's father, after all, and Tubbo gives good hugs...)

"Please," he hears himself say, not knowing who he's speaking to.

He outstretches a hand to grasp at a tree's branch, needing more than his own branch's support. His lips feel numb and cracked. They were already chapped as fuck, but now the blood on them is frozen and crusted. It's disgusting.

The clearing. He gets to the clearing. He thinks there may have been a gap there, but he's not surprised his memory is skipping in places, like a disc that can't catch the needle of the jukebox. It does that a lot.

The light he saw is a house. Not a big one, but a house nonetheless. Neat and wooden, with a small cobblestone porch and burning lanterns and a horse's stable out front. He can hear something like buzzing nearby, but he has no idea if it's real or just his brain malfunctioning.

*Like it always fucking does, it's fucking broken, Dream was right, you're fucked up*

The house looks lived in, but not currently occupied. The horse in the stable is sleeping, breath pluming faintly in the winter air.

He's standing in the clearing in front of the cottage, staring up at the warm, lit-up house, unable to move but leaning ever-so-slightly towards the building, when the teeth latch onto his arm.

He screams on instinct, the sound strangled, and stumbles away from the zombie. The empty, green eye-sockets turn to him. The creature groans and comes after him, slowly but surely.

His arm is numb. He's sure it hurts but he can't feel the pain under how cold he is, and maybe that's a good thing because in the dim light he can see blackish teethmarks and blood sluggishly dripping from the wounds.

He makes it to the porch. His knee bangs into the steps as he hauls himself up them (a confused memory pops out at him-- climbing the steps of Phil's old house with Wilbur on his heels, cackling with laughter, Tubbo somewhere in front of him, tufty tail disappearing around the door's frame) and he scrapes his already hurt shin on the top step.

The zombie grabs his ankle in a rotting hand, and he loses his footing between that and the slick, icy stones. His hands fly out to grab at the wall-railing, numb fingers and bitten nails scrambling for purchase. His ankle is released, but it bends disturbingly against the step and cracks painfully. It overrides the cold for a minute, reminding him strongly of his wing breaking. It feels like fire in his bones.

He kicks the zombie away with his good leg and crawls on his hands and knees— his ankle can't hold his weight— to the door of the cabin.

*Please be unlocked please be unlocked please be unlocked--*

The door swings open when he twists the knob. He sobs with relief and gets to his feet, slamming the door behind him as soon as he's clear.

He's inside. The cabin is cozy-looking, at first glance; the room the door opens into is bigger than he expected from the outside. He can't appreciate details right now, not with how his temples and wounds and heart are all throbbing, but he manages to catch sight of one thing; a kitchenette, small, tucked back into the corner of the room.

He limps over to the chests in the kitchen. There has to be food. There has to be-- there~~has~~ to be--

He opens one of them, leaning on the edge of the open chest of stability, and grabs the first food he sees-- a loaf of bread, wrapped in a thin cloth.

He grabs it, too hungry to care that he should probably eat something lighter, and tears off a piece.

It's not warm, but it's not as cold as the rest of him. It tastes good. The crust is a bit crunchy and

the insides are soft.

He slumps down against the chest. It's warm inside. There's a fire crackling, subdued but present, in the fireplace. Whoever lives here is out, but he's sure they'll return soon. He'll need to get up and hide.

He takes another bite of bread, and then sets the loaf aside. He steels himself and inspects the bite on his arm.

It's... not the worst thing he's seen. He's seen people who've gotten withered before, and that was... bad. That's the worst thing he's ever seen.

This is fairly ugly, though. The teethmarks aren't super deep, but they are numerous (how many teeth do zombies even have? A normal adult mouth amount?) and the skin just around them is slightly greenish with poison, inflamed enough to be puffy. He's sure the only reason he can't really feel it is because of how awful he already feels. It's overridden, hilariously.

He gets back to his feet, still clutching the bread like a lifeline. He searches the kitchen chests for potions or medicines, but no luck; they're all full of food and other kitchenware, organized but not overly neatly.

(Something about that tugs on him, but he isn't sure why, just like the boarlike skull mounted over the fireplace tugs at him-- he's not able to pursue them right now.)

He wraps the bread again, trying not to get blood on the cloth, and puts it away.

He limps to another door, on the nearest wall. His hands are uncoordinated and in the light of the house, in the dim lanterns, he can see frozen blood and split nails on them, bleeding onto his bandages.

His breathing rattles as he fumbles the door open, opening it into a small, neat bathroom. On the counter, various things sit-- his brain only seems fit to note a heavy-looking golden hairbrush that tugs at him the same way the kitchen and the skull seemed to. Strands of light hair cling to its bristles.

He stumbles to the sink, avoiding his reflection-- don't look, big man, don't look-- and falls to his knees, opening the small cabinet below it.

*Please. Medicine, or something, please--*

In a small basket, nestled among medical supplies, there's exactly one small dose of healing potion. Fuck yeah.

He grins shakily and takes it out, not thinking at all before he uncorks the small bottle and downs all but a half-swallow of it. It's warm and bubbly, like soda that's gotten warm but not gone flat. It's sweet and thick, too. It's disgusting, but it fills him with energy and something like relief.

He forces himself back to his feet. He's not-- entirely healed. The dose wasn't big enough. He'd have to take an irresponsible amount to properly heal him from this; he remembers Philza warning them about using too much of *any* potion when they were young. But it's enough to keep him from blacking out, and enough to keep him up while he cleans his wounds as best he can.

He turns on the sink. The water comes out cool and clear-- from a well, if he had to guess. Whatever. If he had any time or consideration for the effort, he'd take it and boil it, so he'd be sure that it's clean, but this is all he can do now.

He adds the cool water to the potion, diluting the potion to nothing more than a faint shimmer, and puts the cork back on. He shakes it as much as he can in this state, and turns off the tap.

Now for the painful part. He unties his bandana with shaking fingers and folds it clumsily, sticking it between his teeth, and pours the mix of potion and water over his bitten arm.

When drank, healing potions are disgusting by taste, but they feel good, warm and somewhat fuzzy feeling. When applied to a wound like a salve, they sting like chemicals, because they are, if with a more magical component.

He curses into the fabric in his mouth (another confused memory-- Techno cursing viciously into the fabric of Wil's sweater when he had to relocate his shoulder when he was a teenager) and tries not to yank his arm away from the sink. He shouldn't leave a mess, just in case whoever lives here will get mad.

*Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense.*

His almost empty stomach turns at the pain, the burning sensation almost too much. He's not sure if he's getting used to the house's warmth or if he's getting warmer.

But the potion does its job; the greenish tint fades from the wounds and stops aching quite as much. The bleeding slows as well.

"Even a little bit of a potion is good for cleaning a wound," Phil had explained, a thousand years ago.

He had a cut down the length of his forearm from a mishap while sparring with Techno, and while the instruction was more for the older two, Tommy had been fascinated with how he carefully mixed no more than a few drops of healing potion into water, and poured it over his wound. The skin had seemed to knit itself back together, maybe not neatly but effectively, and while it left a scar as it healed, he had seemed completely fine afterwards.

Tommy wraps the bitemarks. They hadn't knitted themselves closed, which would be worrying if he didn't even slightly know how the poison works. The-- the potion probably just got rid of the poison, and the wounds will have to heal naturally. That's fine; he can take bandages and stuff from below the sink and wrap the injury. It's fine.

He misses a bit of time, but that's fine too. He blinks in the bathroom and suddenly he's in the kitchen, observing the food chests again. He must be sick, because he's so hot even though the fire hasn't grown and it's now *actively* snowing outside.

But it's fine. It's fine. He's *fine*. He'll get something more to eat and then find somewhere to hide, so he can sleep. Sleep would be nice. Maybe he could dream about Tubbo again. Even though he knows his friend doesn't care anymore, he'd like to dream about him.

He isn't really seeing much in the chests. Oh, there's plenty of food there-- a lot of potatoes, for some reason?-- but he can't really see it. His vision is all blurry.

He finds an apple, inexplicably pristine and healthy, which makes no sense considering where he is-- maybe the person who lives here gets them delivered?-- and bites into it. It's so sweet and the juice from it is practically the gods' nectar itself. He could drool, but that would mean abandoning the apple.

He munches at the apple as he snatches up a blanket from a small armchair, and finds a ladder leading below the house, presumably into a basement. The potion is already starting to wear off,

and he needs to find somewhere to hide before it does.

He drops down the ladder-- uncoordinated and feeling the pain of his broken ankle and wing below the fuzz of the potion and exhaustion-- and finds himself in a storage room of sorts. It's packed with chests, big ones, and it smells dusty.

Of course, he rummages through the chests. They had joked, when he was small, that he was awful like a raccoon, with how often he'd get caught going through his brothers' things. Right now, the memory floats through his mind absently.

("Get out of there!" Wilbur laughs, scooping up Tommy as he digs through his box of records. "You're gonna scratch them up. If you wanna listen to music, you should just ask me.")

He doesn't take much. A pickaxe, a sword (it shimmers with enchantments, which is lovely) and some more food. A few golden apples, which he also knows to be sparing with. The potion chest he finds is tempting, but it looked particularly organized, so he's too concerned to dig into it.

Instead, he digs into the floor. Carefully, carefully, his head feeling fuzzy as he does so because he's getting lightheaded from lack of sleep and food and *everything*, really, he carves out a room a good way down from the house. He uses stolen ladders to connect this little room to the cabin, and tries to disguise it.

With his shaking hands, he isn't sure how good he does. But he's losing consciousness as he digs, so it's all he can do to wrap his stolen blanket around his shoulders and slump to the floor.

The blackness is a comfort and a terror all at once.

## i think i've made my choice

### Chapter Notes

second chapter bitches (affectionate) how we feeling

thank you for all the comments and kudos that you've all already left!!! i didn't expect this to be so well liked bc i literally wrote this whole fic/au for myself dfjghdfkljgjdffg

just a little note; i know canon techno's "voices" are 1) just chat and 2) mostly in a narrative sense, but i am a mentally ill bastard that loves to project, so i definitely put in some level of my experiences when it comes to hearing voices. there's also an element of them being supernatural; i'm not gonna say why bc im fairly sure i'll write about it, but. y'know.

i'm not as happy w this chapter, because i had to rewrite it a lot, but it lays a lot of groundwork for other things, so :-)) and does writing have to be good? is it not enough to have two brothers, sad?

title from saline solution by wilbur soot. yes, i am planning to name all these chapters with your city gave me asthma lyrics

Techno has been enjoying his retirement. Genuinely. He's sure someone who knows him would quip about that seeming impossible, but it's true.

It's quiet and cold and the days are short, but not repetitive. He has a routine, though it isn't overly strict. He has plenty to do. He tends to the bees and the turtles, he tends to his small farm (he's had bigger, but the ever-present ache in his hands tells him this is just fine) he mines for supplies, and he catches up on hobbies he hasn't had time for in years.

Hell, he writes something real for the first time in ages in the first month. It's just a scrap of poetry, nothing worth writing home about, but it's intelligible and actually *good* for once.

He's alone, but every time he feels like *alone* might edge into *lonely*, Philza comes around, with quiet companionship and assistance where he needs it.

Techno has never been one to ask for help, but he's always let Phil help him. Hell, the man was the one to pull him from the Nether and give him a home, when he was essentially a feral child with nothing but a torn cape and a chipped golden knife to his name. He can accept his help. He can accept the two of them spending quiet mornings in the kitchen, making breakfast together, frost clouding the glass of the windows.

"Just like old times," Phil had sighed one morning, early on. Techno had laughed and leaned on the counter for a moment, because he wasn't wrong.

(The best part of the quiet, though, is how the voices are lesser now. It takes work-- he spends an hour or two after sunset killing monsters and destroying things to appease them, but they get quieter as time goes on. They still speak to him, they haven't been completely silent since he was a teenager, but they don't scream for blood as often as before.)



So, yes. He's enjoying his retirement. The routine, the quiet, the almost... domesticity of it all.

As the sun dips below the horizon, he rises from the cave he's been mining in, feeling sweaty below his armor and clothing, but not in a bad way. It's pleasant, in the way the burn in his muscles is pleasant.

He yawns and stretches his arms over his head as he walks along the snow-clotted grass. He feels tired, but again, it's pleasant. He's ready to take a bath and then relax next to the fire with a book...

His steps are light as he walks home. The sky is darkening, but he isn't worried about it; he's in full netherite with enchanted weapons, he'll be fine. Walking after dark without armor is dangerous, but he's not stupid.

Nothing really occurs to him as he walks home. He lets his mind wander, as it likes to do anyway; he has to repair part of the roof, because bad winds had knocked a few of the planks out of alignment, and that could cause a leak. And he needs to mend these pants, because a creeper blew up underground and while it didn't hurt him, it exploded a goddamn hole in his favorite pants. Ugh. Oh, and Phil said he'd be coming by either that evening or the next, which is nice. He'll need to cook something good for the two of them.

It isn't until he walks through the small patch of forest near his home that he comes back to reality, and realizes something is wrong.

There are branches broken off the trees-- as if someone or something had ran into them-- and scraps of fabric caught on the remains. His brows raise and then furrow deeply.

As he investigates, he finds blood. On the snow, clotted onto the scraps of fabric. It's fresh, too, not quite frozen in the lowering temperatures. Like whoever left it only came through recently.

Techno draws his sword, holding it more as a precaution than everything. The voices are getting louder, piqued into curiosity by the scent of blood.

*Visitor??*

*Tommy!*

*Blood blood blood-*

He continues to follow the destruction (the very minor destruction, admittedly; he doesn't think the thing that did this was very strong, or even intending to do this) with hesitation but not worry; he's just confused as to what happened.

Or, well. He isn't worried until he finds the feathers.

His heart freezes and then trips into beating too-fast. *Feathers*. Only a few people on this god-forsaken SMP have feathers of any kind, and they're too big to be from a bird.

Quackity isn't anywhere near here, and his feathers are yellowy-tan anyway; these are grey. Same with Niki; her feathers are white and gold. Ghostbur can't lose feathers anymore. Tommy is exiled, also nowhere near here. The only other person with wings is--

"Phil?" he calls, very, very quietly. Oh, god, if ~~his father~~ Phil is injured and hurt somewhere, he's going to lose his mind. Fuck, fuck--

He breaks into a run.

There's more blood, smeared onto trees, among the stepped-on snow and broken wood. Not a lot of blood, but enough to have him panicking, the voices getting louder.

*Not Phil*

*Someone else*

*Tommy!!!*

"Why the fuck would it be Tommy?" He thinks back, baffled. He comes out of the break in the trees, to his little property. There's more blood, in the snow-- a decently sized, obviously still-warm puddle, because it's still liquid.

Bile stings at the back of his throat. Oh god, he can't lose Phil too. Losing Wilbur was awful enough, he still wakes up in tears because he dreams about when they were happy. If he lost Phil, he wouldn't have anything left.

The voices continue to chant Tommy's name, so he tries to shut them out. Tommy being the one who's here makes no sense. They should know better.

There are dragging footsteps in the snow, and a pile of rotting flesh near his porch. He throws it away with his sword, and looks over at Carl, passively sleeping in his stable. Techno arches his brows, tail flicking absently behind his legs. If something bad had happened, wouldn't his horse be irritated? Hmmm.

The panic doesn't ease, but he's able to think more rationally. If Phil got hurt, he's completely capable of taking care of himself. He's an adult, and a highly competent one at that. Techno doesn't need to panic and fret over him.

*It's not Philza!* One particularly loud voice declares.

His ear twitches, and then they both fold against his head. "Then who is it?" He asks the silent, winter air.

He goes inside. There's meltwater from the snow and diluted blood all over his floors (gross) and one of the chests in the kitchen is open.

He frowns. Whoever's been here must have stolen food...

And the bathroom door is ajar, too. When he checks the small room, he finds blood on the counter, pooled in the bowl of the sink, and the cabinet below the sink ajar.

A thief of some kind has prowled through his things. Not a good thief; they've evidently hurt themselves more than once while trying to rob him.

Panic is still running through him, but now he's also annoyed. Goddammit, why can't he just come home for his bath in peace?

He goes down to the storage room. Another chest is open-- the one where he keeps golden apples and other valuables, hmm-- and there's blood smeared on it's edge. He checks every chest, but not much seems to be missing. A few golden apples (flicker of rage-- he quells it) a few bits of stockpiled food, a sword, maybe a pick? Not as much as he was expecting.

"Who's here?" He asks, not expecting an answer and not getting one.

As he gets to the last chest, he sees an irregular pile of stones on the floor next to it. His stomach twists with anxiety; he knows what makes an irregularity like that.

Someone tampered with his house. Which is not only awfully rude, but is enough to ratchet his natural paranoia into overdrive.

He snatches his pickaxe off his belt and gets rid of the stones, and finds exactly what he feared; a ladder, leading below his home.

The panic hardens into rage. How would someone dare to do something like this, and so obviously? Like he wouldn't immediately see. He can be scatterbrained and he's forgetful at times, but he'd notice the blood and the open chests and doors. What the fuck do they take him for, an idiot?

He goes down the ladder, practically fuming.

The room at the bottom is tiny. No more than a handful of feet to each side. It's dark, too; the only light comes from the glimmer of an enchanted sword.

He frowns. It takes a moment, but he goes back up and grabs one of his lanterns, and then drops back down.

His stomach drops accordingly when he sees the figure curled up against the wall.

A person-- a kid, they have to be, because they're tiny-- is slumped over, underneath one of his blankets, unconscious. Their breath rattles in their chest, slow little inhales, and wheezes when they exhale. Incredibly messy blonde hair, matted with water and grease and blood, is a tangle around their head, dropped between their knees.

And a pair of all-too-familiar wings rest against the wall, behind them. Grey and white and tan, still all soft with youth even if they're messy from whatever happened. The angle can't be comfortable, but they're obviously completely unconscious.

*Tommy!!!!* The voices screech. *It's Tommy!!!!*

But that doesn't make sense. He's exiled, somewhere far away. Techno hadn't bothered to figure out where, he just knew he was gone. There's no reason for ~~his little brother~~ the kid to be here, passed out and bloody in a little hide-hole of a room below his house.

Carefully, like Tommy will break into pieces if he's rough, Techno kneels down next to him and tilts his head up. If he can see his face, he can confirm if this is him or not, and act accordingly.

The face that he finds is battered, with split, bloodied lips and dark circles rivaling his own and an awful, awful cut on his cheekbone, oozing blood. His eyes aren't even entirely closed; there's enough of them open to see the color of his eyes, a dim blue. Almost grey, actually.

But it's undeniably Tommy. He knows that nose (a bit crooked now-- fracture?) and those cheekbones (more prominent, he's so skinny) and that jawline (so much like Wilbur's, even though they're not biologically related).

"What happened to you?" Techno asks the unconscious teenager, who sighs shakily in his sleep.

He needs to get him out of this room. There's just enough space in that little hole he left above them to carry him out, if he's careful about it. And he feels like he weighs barely anything right now, so it'll be easy to carry him.

A fussy, older brother part of him pipes up; *why is he so thin? Has he been eating?* He'll have to cook. For a moment, he's fifteen again, making dinner while Wilbur and Tommy are busy in the living room, doing something silly or another, their laughter background music.

Carefully, he brings Tommy into his arms. His ribs are disgustingly prominent even through his shirt; it feels like holding a kitten, with how easily he can feel them shift below his skin. And his wings... they look awful, all disheveled and matted. The left one hangs crooked, like it's broken. The blood dried into his feathers is evidence of that.

(When he was still small, Phil had broken one of the bones in his wing. He remembers sitting huddled up against Wilbur, the older boy's wing resting over him, as their father told them how it happened, and how he was going to fix it.

It had *not* been this bad.)

"Come on," he murmurs without thinking about it, settling his limp form in his arms, and struggling to the ladder.

The hard part is climbing, and even that is easy enough. He's carried Tommy before, but before it was actually a challenge, because he was a lanky, decently-heavy teenager. Now, he's too skinny, obviously a bit underweight, and even though he's tall, he fits almost too easily in his arms.

He climbs up the ladder, awkwardly cradling his body against his chest. He braces himself against the top of the rough-hewn hole and the wall, and carefully lifts him onto the floor of the storage room. He turns limply onto his back when laid down, and sighs weakly in his unconscious state. His breath has a definite wheeze and rattle to it; he must be sick. (He's not even shivering.)

Techno groans (he's sore as hell, even without carrying Tommy) and climbs up onto the floor of the storage room as well. Now he needs to get the kid upstairs, so he can put him to bed.

Another awkward, uncomfortable carry later (where he almost drops him halfway) and he's finally able to drop him onto his bed.

In the better lighting, he can get a look at what, exactly, is wrong with him.

He's not dressed for the cold; he's wearing a t-shirt and torn up khaki pants, not even enough for more than a warm summer's day. Hell, he's only wearing one shoe.

His left leg is bandaged at the shin, but blood has seeped through the fabric in more than one place, along with a similar sight on his right arm. His hands are bloody, with split nails and frozen gore, and there are cuts down the insides of his arms. The blood on his lips is mostly dried or frozen, and his nose is at least a little broken.

His wing is *definitely* broken, but Techno is hesitant to even touch it. He knows wings are delicate and intricate things, with a lot of muscles and bones, and that's not something he trusts himself to handle. Broken bones themselves are fine, but in ~~his little brother's~~ Tommy's wings? It summons some of that anxiety he left behind when he was a teenager.

He resigns himself to gently cleaning the blood from the feathers, and tightly wrapping the broken wing. He isn't sure if that's good, but from what he remembers of when Phil broke his, that could help...?

*You're making it worse*, he thinks. That's not the voices; that's all him. As usual, he's right.

In his sleep, Tommy groans and shifts uncomfortably on his back. His face creases with pain and

he raises one of his bloodied hands to touch his equally bloody face.

“What am I going to do with you?” He asks, staring at the unconscious teenager in his bed. Predictably, Tommy has no answer.

Cleaning up his wounds is easy. With the help of warm water on old rags and a bit of healing potion, he’s able to get all the excess blood off, and see the depths of the cuts on his face, arms, and hands. They’re not actually that bad; there’s numerous, but not all too deep. He gets them clean and covers them with bandages.

He unwraps his arm, and winces at the sight of it. He was evidently bitten by something-- a zombie, most likely-- and while it doesn’t seem poisoned any longer, it’s ugly, the skin wrinkled and white with bright-red teethmarks.

But he didn’t clean it too badly, honestly. He’s vaguely proud, underneath his anxiety about the whole situation.

His leg is an older wound, on it’s way to healing. A long, vertical cut, from just below his knee to just at his ankle. It looks fine enough, but something about it makes his stomach turn.

He wraps it up again, with fresh bandages.

When checking out his leg, he sees that the same ankle is obviously broken, so he goes ahead and handles that. He immobilizes it with the stiff bandages that he usually uses on his hands.

Ideally, he’d get Tommy’s hair clean too, just to see what, if anything, is injured on his head, but somewhere between him wrapping up his arm and his ankle, he started trembling.

Which is good, technically, because it means he’s getting warmer and he won’t freeze to death. Techno was shocked enough by the wounds he didn’t have time to worry about the small task of “getting the kid warm”. But the shaking is worrisome, nonetheless.

Distracted, he drags his bed closer to the fireplace, and adds a few more logs to the fire.

He, painstakingly gently, gets Tommy out of his worn-out, raggedy clothing, and dresses him again in one of his own shirts. It had the added bonus of letting him see both if he’s even more injured below his clothing (only bruising, thankfully) and letting him see how thin he is. His ribs have valleys between them and his hipbones are knife-sharp below his skin. He looks delicate, which isn’t a way Tommy should look.

As soon as he’s awake, Techno’s going to practically *force* soup down the kid’s throat.

He tucks the blankets up under his chin. He’s obviously running a high fever; his face is flushed but he’s not sweating, and he’s fire-hot against his hand when he touches his forehead.

In the span of what can’t be more than an hour, the entire track of Techno’s retirement has been altered. Because he can’t— he can’t throw the kid out, *obviously*. He’s sick and injured (by the blood god, he can’t stop looking at that *broken wing*—) and obviously can’t take care of himself.

And for all his faults, for all the betrayals, for all Techno has tried to cut off and bury all feelings he has for his family... Tommy’s *still* his little brother. He still has the instinct to protect him, even after all they’ve both done.

*Keep him safe!!!* The voices scream in a unanimous chorus. It’s not often they’re all in agreement like they are now.

Techno groans. He still needs his bath; he'll think about it while getting clean. He's sweaty and sore and tired, and the kid's unconscious. Just sitting around will do nothing for anyone.

He lays a damp, cool cloth over Tommy's forehead before resigning himself to bathing. He leaves the bathroom door halfway open.

Tommy doesn't stir once.

## it's a visceral coming-to

### Chapter Notes

what's canon? i don't know her (shoves the entirety of recent events into a closet)

anyway. philza chapter fuck yeah! writing him is so fun because he's very self aware and competent but also. *god* is it hard to get him right. don't come for me, i spent too much time hyperfixating on my techno to write anyone else well kfhflkhfgfg

also, tommy suffers some more. because he's very fun to hurt. i am just throwing in a bunch of hints of What Happened to him and i hope they make sense.

little tw for this chapter that doesn't warrant a real tag: tommy has a panic attack/small breakdown.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Philza is aware that he's not a perfect father, by any stretch of thought. He loves his sons, he really does, but he knows he's made missteps.

(Like killing Wilbur for instance; the memory of his son begging for death and how his eyes rolled back, his mouth smiled, when he finally stabbed him, will be burned into his brain forever.

Maybe that's less of a misstep and more just him being a horrible person, come to think of it.)

It's okay, though, because he's getting somewhat of a do-over. Not with Wilbur— who's now a cheerful amnesiac ghost— but with Tommy.

Tommy, who he virtually abandoned at age ten. His own adventures awaited, they had been for a while, and he had made the mistake of assuming his kids would be okay without him, especially with how competent he knew they were.

When he visited home the first time, nearly a year in, he almost didn't recognize Tommy, who had gotten taller and more... mature looking over the year. Wilbur, who had just turned eighteen, more than had his hands full with both a chaotic eleven-year-old and a violent fifteen-year-old.

(He looked so tired. His eyes became shadowed, his smile became a rarity when before he was so free with it, and his temper was shorter than ever. Even his wings, so soft and a gentle shade of cream, were somewhat dingy with stress-related neglect.

It was his fault, but he never admitted it.)

He... *tried* to mend their relationship, the few times he visited home. He really did. But Tommy stopped needing him in the way he had when he was small, relying more on his older brothers, but especially Wilbur.

And it had all fallen apart. He hadn't even been able to face it. He had left, and he knows Techno left not long after. And then... well.

He gets some kind of a new chance with Technoblade, too. His middle child, his favorite boy. He

loves them all, but Techno and him share something special.

Retirement softens Techno's sharp edges. When he visits, he's even quieter than before, but happier. He wears his glasses again. His hair looks nicer. He wears blue instead of red. He just looks... *healthier* .

So Phil goes along with it. Helps him build, helps him hunt and plant, keeps him company at night.

(Helps him through odd episodes of complete helplessness, where he can only clutch his hand and whisper denials of the voices.

He's comforted by the fact that that has happened since Techno was young and that he's able to help.)

It's almost like the trips they would take together when he was younger. The ones that would last months, just the two of them. (The ones that lead to them building an empire, long since having fallen apart, like so many things.)

He meant to leave this new home of his and visit Tommy. And see Wilbur/the ghost of him more often, too. But he was always busy with Techno or his own business or brief trips to L'manberg.

(It's no secret that he plays favorites, in the most guilty way.)

His second chance with Technoblade came easily, in moments of quiet companionship, digging farmland into cold earth (it feels so familiar) and drinking coffee together in the mornings.

His second chance with Tommy comes with chaos. He expected nothing less.

Phil lands lightly on the snowy grass in front of Techno's house, letting his wings stay stretched out in the cool air for a moment to soothe them after the decently long flight from L'manberg. He doesn't fly enough, nowadays. It's just not practical, however much he wishes he could fly everywhere.

Attitudes about hybrids have changed a lot over time (hell, all of L'manberg's three presidents had been hybrids) and he's not sure if people would be as harsh as they had been in his own youth. Of course, there's also the matter of how big his wings are.

He's meant for long travels in open plains, not flying down city streets.

He still wishes he could, though. Could be fun.

Humming, he folds his wings against his back and walks up to the cabin. He can see, through the wooden blinds, Techno walking around the house, seemingly pacing. That's odd-- he doesn't pace unless he's overthinking.

Phil knocks before entering, carefully peering into the house to see if there's any threat; Techno can get violent when anxious, a lesson the whole family had learned the hard way. Even with how relaxed he is in his retirement, he knows him too well to assume he'll just be entirely different.

But he doesn't seem... *violent* , just worried. His hair is damp-- evidently, he just took a bath-- and he's twirling it around his fingers as he paces in front of the fire. His bed is pulled close to the fireplace, but he can't see why, not from here.

"Hey, Techno," he greets, taking off his coat and hat to hang them next to the door. "Something



wrong?”

Techno hums once, a long, off-key note, tangling a lock of his hair around his fingers and pulling at it. “Hey,” he says, without looking at him. He’s obviously not really paying attention, lost somewhere within his own mind. That’s fine.

Phil gives him a gentle pat on the back as he passes by, intent on going into the kitchen and seeing what he’s cooked for dinner (he’s gotten very culinarily inclined this past little while) but he doesn’t make it.

Because, laying in the moved bed, is an all too familiar figure. Sure, he’s thinner, and his wings are a wreck, and he’s covered up by the blankets, but he knows who it is instinctively.

He’s a terrible father, but he’d never forget the face of his own son.

“Techno,” he says, reaching over to gently halt his pacing and taking his hand to attempt and ground him. “How did Tommy get here?”

Techno blinks, purple eyes slowly coming back into focus, and he raises a hand to scratch his jaw. “I don’t know,” he says, eyes drifting to his unconscious younger brother. “I found him below the basement. He was just-- asleep there, and he was so cold, and he’s covered in injuries...” He frowns and steps away to gently touch Tommy’s sleeping forehead.

He’s suddenly struck by how much his expression mirrors his own. He knows that furrowed brow, that curled mouth, the faintest of tremors in his hands. It hurts in a way he isn’t sure how to explain.

“He has a fever, I don’t know how high it is, but it isn’t good,” his hair falls around his face and he attempts to push it back. “And I don’t know if the way I wrapped his wing is even goin’ to *help*...”

“I’m sure you did fine,” Phil says, but it comes out a little weak because *what happened to Tommy’s wing?* “Here, let me see.”

Techno doesn’t move far from Tommy’s side, hands hovering slightly over his shoulder. No words are necessary between them, in a situation like this (how many times have they silently helped each other, over the years? Hell, their first year or so together was spent in mostly silence, because of a language barrier) and he only squeezes his hand once, before focusing on Tommy.

(About time he did that, honestly...)

He’s worryingly flushed, his face warmer than the fireplace is, and every breath he takes rattles unpleasantly in his chest. Some kind of respiratory issue; they’ll need medicine and time to fix that, there’s no way to rush it. Taking potions when you’re sick is hardly a good idea, a lesson Phil himself had learned the hard way.

He shifts the blankets aside enough to see the boy’s bandaged wing, and winces at how tight Techno wrapped the bandages. He knows he was well-meaning (because in every situation possible, Techno makes an effort not to hurt his brother, even if he fails on occasion) but the bandages are far too tight, and appear to be in the wrong place entirely.

He sighs. “Bring me some more bandages. Have either of you eaten?”

The simple order seems to break through whatever’s left of Techno’s brain fog, and he manages to find them promptly. “No, he hasn’t woken up and... I might have forgotten to eat anything other

than breakfast.” He hands over the bandages, and hesitates. “...should I cook?”

“Might bring you back into the real world,” Phil jokes a little too flatly. Techno’s lips lift with the tiniest of smiles. “If you feel up to it. Whatever you want to make will be fine, I don’t think Tommy will be up for a while.”

He walks over to the kitchen, expression clearing a little as he gets to work cooking.

They work quietly, on their separate tasks. Techno cuts up vegetables with a distracted sort of precision, and Phil carefully unwraps Tommy’s wing.

It’s not the easiest, with the kid laying down, but he thinks he might be able to get it fixed up.

It’s an oddly deliberate break, for some reason. He had originally assumed he broke it while flying, or after a bad landing, but looking at it... that’s not the case. If he had broken it either way, it would be more jagged, a messier break all over. His wing wouldn’t look so normal from the outside, the only evidence of a break how it hangs *just* crooked.

But the break he has is... *precise* . A straight break somewhere around the middle of one bone, along with another fracture nearer to the top of another.

The placement of the injury makes his own wings ache with sympathy; it must have been *agonizing* for Tommy. He’s sure the pain must be why the feathers are so unkempt, greasy and crooked with neglect, even in the place Techno evidently cleaned. He can’t imagine preening his own wings in such a state, and Tommy has so much less experience with that.

He pauses in his assessment of the injury to brush back his dirty hair and pet at his forehead. “Who did this to you?” He asks, without thinking about it. Because there’s *no* way this was a natural break. He’s had his own wings tampered with by another person, and while it wasn’t quite this bad, it *was* this deliberate.

He feels hot with anger. His skin itches with the dirty feeling of knowing this could have been preventable.

Maybe if he had shown up to this godforsaken server earlier. Maybe he could have stopped them from leaving at all and kept them close as they aged. Maybe *he* shouldn’t have ever left at all. Because he’s being stared in the face by the evidence of his own failings as a father; his sick, hurt child. Isn’t that proof of failed parentage, in almost a textbook way?

Phil bites into his tongue and shakes his head, trying to clear it. Now is not the time, and who’s to say this is strictly *his* fault? Tommy has a bad habit of getting himself into trouble, of acting out, of provoking people for the hell of it. It’s not completely his fault.

(It’s his fault Tommy acts out so much, though. Abandonment issues make kids do stupid things.)

His hands don’t shake as he carefully wraps the bandages around his wing, focusing on immobilizing it without accidentally worsening either the pain or the break itself. He’s done this before, albeit on himself.

His hands *begin* to shake when Tommy starts crying. “It’s okay, shh,” he soothes, but it’s fruitless.

He shifts his wing just slightly to wrap the bandages around the underside, and he lets out a choked *scream* , blue eyes opening in panic and his body attempting to scramble away.

Something clatters to the floor in the kitchen, but Phil can’t focus on that, because Tommy’s

mumbling in a slurred panic, eyes cloudy with fever and sleep, nothing like recognition showing in them.

“No, no, please, don’ hurt my wings again, please, ’ve been *good--* ” Tears begin to pour down his cheeks, and he wobbles on the edge of the bed. “‘M sorry, please!”

“Tommy,” his voice comes out as a plea of his own. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

The gentle assurance is completely unheard, because he draws his legs up to his chest (revealing all the bandages on his bare skin, Techno wasn’t kidding when he said he was covered in wounds) and hugs them tightly, sobbing. “I’m sorry, I’ll be better, please just *don’t hurt me again !*”

Phil reaches in, gently, and brushes his fingers over his shoulder. He would ask if he’s comfortable with being touched if he thought he’d even hear him, but between the panic and the fever, he’s fairly sure he’d have a better chance of getting a brick wall to listen to him.

He still tries it. “Tommy, I’m going to touch your shoulder, okay?” He rests his hand on his trembling shoulder, and he gasps wetly, through his tears. He winces at how prominent his bones are; he can feel his collarbone dig into the side of his hand, the joint of his shoulder almost sharp against his palm. “Shh, you’re alright. It’s just me, it’s just Phil, you’re *safe* .”

Tommy is just muttering “ *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry* ,” under his breath now, face tucked against his knees, trembling like he’s freezing despite how hot he can feel he still is. It hurts something inside of him to see him so *scared* .

What happened to the vibrant, passionate teenager he was just a short few months ago? What made him this crying, weakened shell of himself? He knows that Tommy of a few months before wouldn’t break down like this. He’s always hated showing vulnerability, even when he was small.

*Who did this to him?*

(He thinks about the tiny five-year-old he found huddled behind a trash bin in a village near their property, dirty and obviously hungry, tired too, yet so determined to fight him off. He had that crude little wooden sword in his hands, and he had held it awkwardly out at him.

He knew from the moment he saw that light in his eyes that he had to protect him, that there was something he *recognized* in him.)

“You don’t have to apologize,” he assures him, unsure if he’s listening, and sits down on the edge of the bed. He rubs circles on his shoulder with his thumb. “You’re okay. I just need to finish wrapping your wing, and then you can go back to sleep. Can you let me do that?”

“Don’t touch my wing, *please* ,” he sobs against his knees. “It hurts, don’t touch it, please--”

“I’ll be quick,” Phil assures. “If I leave it unwrapped, the break is going to get worse, and you might not ever be able to fly again.” The words feel thick in his mouth, like he’s swallowing honey without any of the sweetness.

It’s a painful prospect, the idea of an avian hybrid no longer being able to fly. He thinks about how he only ever feels like he can truly *breathe* while flying, and wonders if that’s part of the reason Tommy’s in such a state. He can only imagine how insane it would make *him*.

The sobs begin to slowly cease, and he peeks up from his knees. His cheeks are wet with tears, clumping his light eyelashes together, and there’s a split in his lip that’s been reopened by his fit. He looks his age, for once. “...I wanna fly again,” he murmurs. “Will it hurt?”

“Only a little,” he promises. “I’ll be as gentle as possible.”

He slowly uncurls, settling on the bed a little better. “Okay,” he mumbles, shuffling over so he can actually reach him. His injured wing extends slightly towards him.

“Thank you, Tommy, you’re doing so well,” he praises gently, knowing its one of the few things that’s always comforted his youngest. “It’ll only take a moment.”

“Mhm,” he agrees with a sleepy hum. The panic is leaving him, and the fever is only wearing him down again. He doubts he’ll even remember this when he next wakes up.

He carefully moves the loosened bandage back into place, and secures it carefully.

The sight of the clean, almost sterile bandages against the dirty, matted feathers make him want to fuss over him like he did when he was little, straightening them out and getting them clean, but he feels that would be crossing a boundary. And he’s already so terrified...

“Food’s done,” Techno calls, voice sounding faint. “Is he alright?”

Tommy’s eyes are half-open, and he makes a sleepy noise in response. Phil isn’t sure he’s actually conscious, let alone able to speak. He gently lays him back down in the bed, and he goes willingly. It’s easy to tuck him back under the blankets, and he spends a long moment staring down at him. He looks simultaneously older and younger than he should.

“He’s fine,” he replies finally, forcing himself away from his youngest’s bedside. At the table, there’s only one plate set out; Techno only has a mug clasped in his own hands. “You’re not eating?”

“I already ate,” he mumbles. “While I was cookin’. Not very hungry, anyway.”

His brows furrow. There’s an unspoken tension between them, when it comes to food. It’s half the reason he comes over for dinner so often, because he knows otherwise, Techno will just *forget*. Not on purpose (he doesn’t think so, at least) but he’s not good at listening to his body about things.

(Not just hunger; he got stabbed once and didn’t think to mention it until they were home.

That had been... a *night* .)

He knows right now is not the time to press on this, but he tucks it away for later. “So, how exactly did you find him?” He asks, starting to eat.

## Chapter End Notes

i don't like this chapter very much but after this we get more fun tommy angst stuff so  
also ive just resigned myself to posting fic when its done and not obsessing ov  
bc obsession is the death of me so unless theres an error do not criticize me /hj

the working title of this chapter was "philza minecraft's questionable parenting decisions"

## i thought i couldn't love anymore

### Chapter Notes

another tommy chapter!!! y'all ready to Cry??? and it's the longest yet!!!!!!!  
woooooo!!!!!!!

fun fact; i don't have like. a super set plan for this au. like i have a plot (even if it's fairly bare) but i really just let my inspiration and need for family hurt/comfort drive me. it's called creative liberty

anyway, this sets up some backstory stuff!!! some Past Events!!! there is Tenderness! Affection!!! perhaps even some Gentleness!

small tws; implied disordered eating due to depression, implied self harm and suicidal ideation (nothing graphic, it's just kinda there), more references to dream abusing tommy, and some more of What Happened with tommy's wing. there's also like one line that implies some kind of sexual abuse, but it's more tommy being paranoid than anything that actually happened. none of that warning is actually part of the plot.

title from your sister was right by wilbur soot! (which is my favorite wilbur song, it is the best and if you disagree get off my fic /j)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Time wears on.

Tommy sleeps for two days and runs a fever for most of it.

(Techno is on pins and needles the whole time. He doesn't sleep willingly, too focused on worrying over the unconscious, sick teenager that was all but dropped into his lap. He kept himself busy with repairing his weapons and reading about wound and illness care and organizing the whole house in a fit one morning. His thoughts are a frenzy, trying to keep him awake.

It isn't until he sees himself in the mirror and mistakes the circles under his eyes for bruises that he realizes he should probably sleep. It's late in the second day, and he can't actually remember the last time he slept, before this. (Phil probably forced him to rest not too long ago. He's good about doing that.)

And the stress has only worn him out further, the voices constantly echoing his anxiety back to him, sharp chants of  
*if you take your eyes off of him he'll die*  
that made it impossible to rest.

He sank into a chair at Tommy's bedside. He was unconscious within moments, but he didn't sleep for more than a few hours before waking up in a panic, fully expecting the body in his bed to not be breathing.

But he was fine.)

When Tommy wakes up, he doesn't know where he is, just that he's freezing and someone is

touching him and he can't move his wings and he can't *breathe* .

Someone is speaking, the voice familiar but not at all comforting, and he squirms out of the restrictive cocoon of blankets he's in, tumbling to a wooden floor and scrambling to his feet. One ankle feels leaden with pain, but he can't focus on that.

All his brain is screaming is *not safe don't trust it Dream is here* and he sways in place, anticipating angry hands and shouting and burning. Anticipating pain, though he isn't sure what he's done to deserve it this time.

He has no weapons. He had a sword, he took it from— somewhere?— but it's gone now and he's dressed in different clothes with no pants on, and *oh* the implications there—

Something flashes in the corner of his vision and he swings heavy, cold hands at it. Someone curses and he feels wetness on his fingers and *oh god he hurt someone* — he hurt *Dream* — and he knows the punishment will be dire.

*He'll go through with the threat about cutting off my wings this time, oh god—*

"Sorry," he says immediately, tongue feeling numb and cold like, he's shoved a chunk of ice in his mouth. For some reason, it's hard to breathe evenly, and the little air he can get feels thin. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, please don't..." His fingers fumble without coordination to the only thing he has of value. His compass. That'll make Dream go easy on him, right? "You can have this, just— please don't hurt me!"

"Tommy, I'm not going to hurt you!"

That voice... It's not Dream. It's too deep and too genuinely *concerned* . And it's so familiar. It makes him think of sword fighting and strong hands and facial scars and pink hair and blue clothes and—

He catches sight of crooked black glasses and purple eyes and he's suddenly back in reality.

*Technoblade* is staring at him, eyes wide. Blood drips from his nose, obviously from Tommy punching him. His glasses are off-center and there's a cautious kind of concern in his expression.

He has his hands up, palms forward, trying to look as un-intimidating as possible. "Tommy," he starts, softly. It doesn't sound like his normal voice, but it's still familiar. When was Techno that soft with him? Years ago? It must have been when they were all still living together... "I think you should lay back down," he says, stepping forward with a hand held out. "You don't wanna wear yourself out."

Tommy steps back, clutching his compass. His tongue is still numb. "How did I get here?" He asks, looking around in blind confusion. The cabin is as he remembers, modest and warm, and there's a fire roaring in the hearth. (But he's still so cold. He tries to draw his wings in closer, but one of them hurts something awful and both are stiff with disuse, so he lets them droop.)

"You walked, if I had to guess." His older brother crosses his arms and watches him curiously, eyes flickering over his form for whatever reason. "I found you under the house, remember?"

He blinks unevenly. *Does* he remember? Not really. He knows he got here, at some point, to this little cabin in the tundra... and he stole things... and then Techno found him—?

This is Techno's house? Oh, *fuck*—

“Yeah, I remember,” he lies. He only remembers part of it, but his head is aching and he can’t force himself further. “Why... why do I feel so awful?” He steps forward, wanting nothing more than to lay back down. But he’s not sure what he’s doing here or what’s wrong with him or why Techno hasn’t run a sword straight through him.

“You’re sick,” he explains patiently. “You’ve had a fever for days, and you’re underweight, and you were pretty hurt...”

He nods along. That... makes sense... there was a zombie at some point, right? And his ankle, and his wing.

His wing.

He reaches up to touch it, and his fingers meet bandages, neat and secure around him. His heart sinks. “Oh. That one is actually broken, huh.” His voice loses all energy, and he slumps. The memory is rushing back and it *hurts*. He had hoped, vainly, that that was a nightmare, that Dream didn’t-- that he hadn’t-- but he *did* —

Techno catches him and brings him into a warm hug, something so familiar yet so far away from what he expected. He’s warm, so warm. “Yeah,” he says, oddly soft. “Phil had to bandage it. You can’t fly...”

He lets himself be dragged to bed. Techno lays him down on his side, so he won’t crush his hurt wing, and brushes his hair back from his face. “Your fever’s finally broken,” he says. “That’s good. It’s been *way* too high— I was about to start panicking.”

Tommy nods along, feeling heavy and tired even without the fever, even after sleeping for god knows how long. “Where’s Phil?” He mumbles. Wasn’t he here? He can remember hearing his voice, at some point. And he apparently took care of his wing.

He thinks he might hear a huff of annoyance, and he can definitely see Techno’s ear flick, golden earrings catching the light. “He went to L’menberg,” he says, his clipped tone evidence that he doesn’t approve. “He’ll come back soon enough. You’ve worried the hell out of both of us.”

He mumbles and presses his face against the pillow. His stomach hurts and he doesn’t want to move. (He doesn’t deserve their concern.) “I’m sorry,” he mumbles. “I’m sorry I’m here. When I’m better, I’ll-- I’ll leave...”

“No, no, hey,” Techno brushes his hair back, concern flickering on his face. “You don’t have to leave. I have space for you, and you’re sick. You can’t fly, either, so it’s just stupid to leave.”

Tommy might still be a little feverish. Because he’s not sure this is real. *Technoblade* is willing to let him stay, after he (broke into his house? stole from him? showed up beaten and sick to his peaceful little cabin?) forced his way back into his life?

Techno hasn’t seriously wanted anything to do with him since he moved out at eighteen.

The idea of him caring about him again is good, though. Growing up, they had been close, at least until Techno left.

It was Techno who taught him how to cook, how to sew, how to properly put on armor. It was Techno who insisted he could go hunting with him, when Wilbur and Phil were too cautious to let him. After Phil left, it was Techno who cooked and farmed and hunted for them.

Techno had never been as touchy-feely as Wilbur, so for someone as comfort-seeking as Tommy,

their relationship hadn't been as easy. But they made it work.

And then he moved out.

(After that awful, *awful* fight with Wilbur, the one where they both threw things and screamed at each other, the one that made Tommy barricade himself in the closet with his communicator so he could talk to Tubbo all night, because he didn't feel safe.

The one that left Techno flinching around their older brother, that left Wilbur with a split eyebrow, that left Tommy jumping at shadows and raised voices for years.

That was a bad night.)

(-and then there's everything that happened after that.

Betrays upon betrays.

Tubbo's firework scars.

Withers.

*"Do you want to be a **hero** , Tommy?! Then **die like one!** " )*

One older brother is already dead and so different as a ghost. Maybe he should appreciate the comfort of it all, while he still has it.

Tommy observes his brother, tired eyes trying to find any evidence that this is a trap.

All he can see are the dark circles under Techno's eyes, a shade or two lighter than the purple of his irises. The rumpled fabric of his shirt and cape, suggesting he's been sleeping in his clothes. The blood drying under his nose, forgotten and unheeded. How his hair is only shoved into a halfhearted ponytail, loose strands sticking out all over.

He looks unsettlingly *human* . Sometimes Tommy forgets, really, especially considering the harm he's done, that Techno is only a man at the end of the day, piglin blood aside. That the ever-confident, regal-looking King Technoblade is only a facade, a cover for the nervous, awkward person underneath.

He thinks about Techno reading to him at night. He used to have such terrible nightmares, and Techno was the only person who was ever awake so late. If climbing into bed with Wilbur didn't work, he would sneak into Techno's bed, and ask him to read something. Anything.

(It feels like morbid foreshadowing now, but when he was small, Techno read him the story of Theseus several times, and it always put him to sleep.)

He recalls a thousand tiny memories; Techno carrying him when he was little. Techno sneaking him outside their home's barriers to go hunting. Techno teaching him how to sword-fight.

Techno baking cookies for him on his birthday, because he was the only one who could get them right. Techno with a cup of coffee in the morning, drowsy and quiet, his hair untied and practically a fluffy cloud around his face. Techno with his old, dorky glasses, the ones on that silly golden chain...

The gentle version of Techno who now only exists in fractured childhood memories.

For all his betrayal, for all he's hurt Tommy, he's some of the only family he has left.



"I'm staying," he says, quietly.

Techno smiles, no feral edge, no madness, only *kindness*. "You are," he confirms. "Now, I'll get you somethin' to eat." He gets up, suddenly very brisk and businesslike. He only pauses briefly to wet a rag and clean the blood from his face.

Tommy stares after him. "Do I have to eat?" He asks, maybe a little childishly.

Techno grabs a bowl from one of the chests, and immediately ladles some kind of thin, light looking soup into it. "Yeah?"

When he frowns, pushing himself up to sit against his pillows, he glances at him and pointedly raises his brows. "Tommy, I don't know the last time you ate. Judgin' by how skinny you are, it's been weeks since you had a full meal. You're *goin'* to eat." He places the bowl in his hands, and forcefully puts his palms around it and a spoon.

He doesn't know why, but that simple action, paired with the demand for him to eat, has him taking a hurried spoonful from the bowl and swallowing it. He can't taste much— now that he's awake and focused on something other than blind panic, he's aware of how congested he feels— but it's warm and at least not disgusting.

(Dream would force him to eat, sometimes. Not like this-- he'd threaten him with more violence, honestly-- but the words are similar enough.)

"I ate when I first got here," he mumbles around his spoon. He's suddenly not very hungry at all. "I stole an apple."

"I noticed," Techno says dryly, grabbing himself a bowl as well and settling in a chair next to Tommy's bed. "Did you eat any of the golden apples you stole too?"

He tries to piece his memories together, to recall if he did. He surely would feel better if he did... "I don't think so."

"Good," he has no spoon, and simply sips from the edge of the bowl. Tommy can hear his tusks click against the polished, carved wood. "You'd wreck yourself even further, doin' that. Glad to know you have some sense left."

It's-- almost normal, and Tommy laughs abruptly. Techno's brows raise curiously.

God, for some reason this feels so *normal*, like he's a kid again, sick in bed, with Techno fussing over him and Wilbur off somewhere, probably getting more blankets. With Techno gently teasing him for getting sick in the first place, because he did something silly like-- like fall into the lake they used to fish in or stay out late chasing fireflies.

"After you eat, I'll have to check your wounds," Techno offers, over his faint giggles while he tries to eat. (God, Dream was right, he's really cracked.) "You're healin' well, all things considered. Maybe we can get your hair washed out today, too."

He attempts to run a hand through his hair, and then winces as he only meets nearly-matted tangles. "That'd be nice. I can't remember the last time I did it."

"That's gross," Techno mutters under his breath. "Yeah, we're definitely washin' it out today."

Tommy hums in agreement (he's pretty gross in general right now) and takes another bite of his soup. "So, you've been living out here? For how long?"

“Eh, few months now. It’s... different.” The lightness disappears from his voice, and even in his subdued state, Tommy’s aware of the awkward tension that’s settled over them.

Because why wouldn’t it? Their last major interaction was him dying by Techno’s hand. Was Techno spawning Withers in L’manberg. Was-- was another betrayal.

His appetite is entirely gone, but he dutifully takes another mouthful of soup. He can kinda taste it now, but mostly just the salt of it. He can’t eat anymore.

He rests the still-warm bowl on his lap. It’s still halfway full, but he doesn’t want to finish eating. He’s not hungry.

Techno watches him for a long moment, he can feel the familiar weight of amethyst-colored eyes.

“You need to finish that, you know.” A moment’s pause. “You’re not going to get better if you don’t eat, Tommy.”

He fiddles with the bowl. “I’m not hungry,” he mumbles, barely above a whisper.

“What?” It’s just how Techno’s voice usually sounds-- kind of blunt and sharp at the same time-- but for a moment, he’s not in this warm cabin, he’s sitting on the ground with Dream in Logstedshire.

And Dream is holding his wrist in his hand, tightly, blunt nails digging into the thin fat there. “*What? Speak up*,” he says, calm, sharp, blunt. Empty of compassion, filled with hate. “*Stop mumbling*.”

Tommy swallows a mouthful of saliva that makes him feel like he’s going to vomit.

“I’m not hungry!” he says, a bit too loud, but much clearer. “I-I’m not hungry, Techno. I’m sorry.” His cheeks burn when he looks up, and sees something so-- so *familiar* on Techno’s face.

It’s not pity; Techno doesn’t *pity* anyone. But it’s something similar. Sympathy? Whatever that looks like. He’d gotten used to Dream’s false sympathy, a thin icing of sweet concern over malicious glee. But this doesn’t feel like that.

There’s a bit more silence, with the two of them making tense eye-contact, before Techno shrugs, expression clearing, settling into the neutral that he’s so known for. “Alright, fine. You’ll have to eat again later, but for now, this should be fine.” He takes the bowl away and carries it to a small sink.

Tommy is suddenly very aware that he’s shaking, and not just from the cold. His hands are sweaty and his heart is racing.

Techno isn’t mad at him for not doing something. Of course he isn’t. When has Techno gotten mad at him for not being able to do *anything*? Techno is many things, but he isn’t needlessly cruel. (At least, not like that. Needlessly violent, perhaps, but not needlessly cruel.)

He forces himself to take a deep breath. He feels strangled by the blankets around him, by the bandages wrapped around his limbs. He wishes more than anything that his wing wasn’t broken, that he could just go outside and fly away, into the sky, into the sun, until he burns up into nothing but ash--

“Hey,” Techno says, quietly, suddenly at his side again. His hand hovers over his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

He tries to take another deep breath, but he chokes on a cry and has to bury his face in his hands. He's not going to break down. He's not. He's *not*--

"Here, let me check your injuries, then maybe you can go back to sleep," he's speaking softly, not quite quiet enough, but comforting nonetheless. It makes him feel small, like he's ten again and Techno's still one of his idols. "If you're not too tired, I can wash your hair, too." His hand settles on his shoulder, gentle. (*familiar, someone else did that not too long ago, who?*)

Tommy forcefully rubs his tears from his eyes, rubs the snot from under his nose with his sleeve. Gross. Now he really feels ten; he threw fits a lot even at that age.

"Okay," he says, forcing down the panic, the fear, the sadness.

Techno's hands are gentle as he checks over his bandaged arm, leg, and ankle. The split in his lip (finally healing after such a long time; Tommy can't remember when it happened, but he knows it was a while ago) and the cuts on his arms. He doesn't pry about why they're there.

(A murky memory from when Tommy was young, but more knowledgeable-- the view of Techno sitting, teary-eyed, as Wilbur wrapped cuts on his arms in their bathroom. He must have been only eleven or twelve, but instinctively he knew the cuts were self-inflicted.)

"You're a mess," Techno mumbles, putting a fresh bandage on his cheek. He scrunches his face instinctively. "Quit that, I can't cover this when you do that."

The speed that he forces his face to relax is probably unnecessary.

Once he's all attended to, he feels sore just from sitting up and letting Techno manipulate his limbs. Ugh, being sick and hurt *sucks*.

(Why is he complaining? It's his fault.)

Techno's disappeared for the moment, into another room, so Tommy props himself up on the edge of the bed, attempting to untangle his hair with his fingers. It's all greasy and stringy, because he hasn't bothered to take care of it for a while. The last time he can remember washing it... it was when Dream did it for him, right? When he wasn't able to move because of his wing being broken and the pain being so great. Maybe.

The cabin he's in is nice. It's simple, but there are little touches that make it so undeniable who lives here; the skull above the mantle (the one Techno's worn as a mask, like the dramatic bitch he is) and the old, old blankets folded in the armchair (he actually recognizes one of them as one he had when he was a kid) and the way everything is organized, but not *neat*. It's all set up in a way that works for Techno, and probably Techno alone.

Of the places he could end up, this is a good one. Kind of. He's still not convinced Techno doesn't resent him for being here (he has to deal with him now, sick and panicky and incredibly hurt) but at least he's warm and cared for and has food to eat. He doesn't think Techno will take away his things and destroy them, and while he's violent, he wouldn't hurt him for no reason.

(He won't-- *no*. He'd never.)

(Phantom pain strikes through his bandaged left wing, and he bites into his hand for a moment, until it passes.)

"Alright, we're goin' to have to get you out of bed for this," Techno walks out of the bathroom with soap in hand, and walks briskly to the kitchen. Tommy isn't sure what he's thinking (it's so hard to

read his expressions sometimes) but his eyes are red. Has he been crying? “Because you’re in my bed and I’m not gettin’ it all wet. Do you think you can get up?”

He places his feet on the smooth wooden floor, and grimaces at the idea of putting weight on his broken ankle. He can’t believe he broke his ankle on some *stairs* after all he’s been through. What a bitch move. “Yeah, probably.” He braces himself for the pain and stands. It’s... actually not as horrible as he expected. Yeah, it hurts, but he’s relatively stable.

*Fuck yeah, I am so good.*

He tries to take a step, and almost falls face-first on the floor, in pain and shame. It’s only because of Techno all but appearing at his side that he doesn’t.

*Maybe not so good.*

“You’re fine,” he says, apparently expecting Tommy to apologize. He frowns. “Should’ve thought about your ankle, sorry. C’mon.” He’s guided carefully to a simple chair in front of the sink.

“You’re lucky I have a lot of experience dealin’ with really tangled hair, y’know. If I didn’t know how to fix it, we’d have to cut it all off.” Techno chuckles quietly, and the sound comforts him in a way he isn’t about to dissect.

“I refuse to be bald,” he mutters. “What do you need me to do?”

“Lean back and don’t complain too much when I untangle your hair.”

Tommy nods, resolving to not do that, and settles in the chair, even getting his wings out of the way so Techno himself has no reason to complain.

It lasts all of five minutes into the process. While Techno is carefully untangling his now-wet hair with a comb, he starts complaining.

“That hurts,” he whines. “A lot.”

“Well, your hair is a mess, so it makes sense,” he says without sympathy, pouring water over his hair. “You’ll be fine. It’s going better than I expected.”

He groans pointedly with pain when he just barely scrapes his scalp with the comb.

“Aren’t sick children supposed to be less annoying?”

He scowls. “I’m not a child.” He flicks water on his face and he splutters, indignant, not caring that it makes him cough. “You bitch!”

He has more choice words and insults planned, but his cough gets worse and he has to sit up, water dripping down his shoulders as he wheezes for breath. His chest hurts and he feels like he can’t get enough air.

His hand settles on his back, gently, and rubs comforting circles. There’s really nothing he can do for a few moments, but desperately try to draw in a full breath, raising a hand to grasp at his own chest.

He’s offered a glass of water as soon as he’s able to breathe with any sort of stability. He sips from it shakily. “Feelin’ any better?” Techno asks, still rubbing his back.

“Not really,” Tommy mumbles. He’s suddenly so tired, and everything kind of just... hurts, now.

He sinks back against the chair and closes his eyes. "Can we finish my hair, so I can go to sleep?"

"Yeah, of course."

They're completely quiet for the next few minutes, save for the occasional muttered curse of discomfort. Techno doesn't try to pick at him again, but instead washes his hair with an almost laser focus.

It starts to feel nice; the water is cool, and the little he can smell of the soap is nice, something simple and plain. And it's obvious that Techno is really trying not to hurt him now.

All told, Tommy almost falls asleep sitting up, leaning back over the sink.

He misses time again, maybe because of said almost-sleeping-- he closes his eyes still at the sink, with Techno's claws gently scratching his scalp as he rinses his hair, and opens them sitting on the edge of the bed again. His hair is damp (dried just a little, presumably with the towel on his shoulders) and he's barely able to keep his eyes open.

"-pretty long," Techno's speaking, as he runs the comb through his now smooth hair. It rests in cool curls against the base of his neck. "When did you last cut it?"

Tommy leans forward and places his forehead against the center of his older brother's chest. "Dunno," he replies, closing his eyes again. "Few months, I think. Wilbur cut it a while ago."

"Ah," he pats his head before setting the comb aside. "Are... are you plannin' to sleep on me, or should I lay you down?" It has all the inflection of a joke, but he could dare to say he sounds flustered. Haha.

"You're a good pillow," he argues sleepily. "I'll lay down." He leans back, and then flops onto his side in bed, yanking the blankets up. His good wing drapes over himself as an extra layer, while he tucks the other close to his back. There-- nice and warm.

"Sleep well," he hears, distantly. A hand brushes through his still-damp hair.

He doesn't know why-- maybe it's just being sick, maybe he's just too tired-- but he feels safe, dozing off like this.

## Chapter End Notes

tommy spends like, so much of this au sleeping and being sad, and for that we stan

# i had my cake, i ate it, it ate me too

## Chapter Notes

a chapter not named with your city gave me asthma lyrics?? whataconcept.png

a fun chapter w TWO perspectives babey. i am so tired of looking at it and i lowkey despise it but i think y'all will enjoy it!

backstory stuff,,,,, lots of angsty backstory stuff :-) also dream is here. why did no one tell me writing him being all cryptic is so FUN. we're finally gettin into plot stuff!!! next chapter also has more people!!!

all tws for this chapter are covered in the tags! minor self-harm, past abuse, a panic attack, a lil breakdown, just not good times all around.

tommy is awake in this chapter but At What Cost.

but there are also hugs so it evens out. finally my soft technoblade tag is coming into play. he's just a gentle man. a good brother.

longest chapter so far..... past 5k babyyyyyyyyyy

title from feel better by penelope scott!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*The walls of the cave are close and almost spiked with spines of rock.*

*Techno feels small as he steps closer to his friend, a hand going out instinctively to grab at his. "What are we lookin' for, again?" he asks, just to fill the oppressive silence.*

*Dream tilts his head back towards him, smiling. Due to the two of them being alone, and him genuinely trusting Techno, he's not wearing his mask. "I found some ruins down here, I thought maybe you'd want to check them out. Not a stronghold, I don't think, but some kind of... **temple** ?"*

*Something feels wrong about this situation, but he can't figure out why. He fiddles with his hair-- shorter than he expected. "It does sound interesting," he mumbles.*

*Suddenly, they're in the ruins, tall and stark against the walls of the open cave, made of obsidian, shot through with something redder than blood. Dream pokes curiously at what looks like an altar with his sword. "Wonder what this is for."*

*"Probably nothin' good," Techno shrugs, inspecting the runes carved into the altar, inlaid with that same red material. Not redstone; it's too solid. "Sacrifices, probably."*

*"Yeah. Why else would they have a creepy temple underground?"*

*Nothing seems right. The wrong feeling has enveloped everything.*

*Dream grabs his hand, and pulls his arm over the altar. His palm is warm and he's not wearing his*

*gloves, so their hands are touching, bare. "I wonder what would happen if I added blood to it." He has a knife in hand, one of the ones off his belt.*

*Techno can't fight; he doesn't know **why** he doesn't fight. He's aware, now, that this isn't real, that it's (ironically) an actual dream. He needs to **wake up**. This isn't even how this event happened--*

*He cuts into his arm, just below his wrist, and blood spills from his skin. It splatters onto the altar, making the runes glow.*

*The voices begin to scream, and scream, and **scream**. Suddenly, Dream's unmarred, young face has been slashed, blood pouring from the wound across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. He isn't screaming, face completely impassive, green eyes sparkling, but the voices continue.*

*He's fairly sure he starts screaming, too.*

-

Techno wakes up with a brief cry, before he raises his hand and bites into his palm to restrain himself. He's shaking, he realizes, sitting up straight and stiff in his armchair.

The voices are nearly silent in reality, only faint murmuring. No screaming, no, they have little reason right now. One of them mumbles about him waking Tommy, but his little brother is still asleep. He can see the top of his blonde head under the blankets, the fluffy feathers of his wing over the top of them.

Where he's biting into his hand, he can taste blood. It's morbidly comforting, and it calms him enough that he can pull it away. His palm is bleeding, though not badly; he didn't bite hard enough to really hurt himself.

He gets up from the armchair (his back protests, he should *not* be sleeping in chairs, but Tommy's taken over his bed and he hasn't made a new one yet) and goes to the bathroom to clean his hand.

He rinses the blood away, revealing the small marks his teeth left. He wraps the small wound. His hands need the stabilization, anyway; they've been hurting again. (He can't believe his competitive drive and hyperfocus made him ruin his hands for the rest of his life. It's almost funny.)

It's just after dawn. The sky outside is lightening, in shades of pink and grey and blue. He drinks a glass of water in the kitchen while staring out the window, feeling tired and antsy. That's not a new feeling; he usually feels like that.

It's been worse the last week, because he has a sick teenager sleeping in his bed, but still. Not that weird. Even with Tommy sick and needing to be protected ( *keep him safe keep him healthy make him happy* ) his anxiety has definitely been higher at other points in his life.

He just doesn't know why he's started to have that dream again. He hasn't spoken to Dream in... a while. And never meaningfully enough to drag up that awful memory. Sure, it's always there in some way (because of the voices, those have never calmed since that day in the ruins) but he doesn't usually wake up in a fit of panic about it, anymore. Why would he? It's been years.

He runs his fingers through his hair, undoing his ponytail. He isn't sure why, he just-- he wants to know it's still as long as he thought it was. It is, falling around his waist heavily, warm and clean and soft. He wraps the strands around his fingers and tugs, rooting himself in reality. It feels... not *good*, but it's enough.

"Techno?" Tommy's voice asks sleepily. "Are you awake?"

He sets the glass down on the counter and sighs. “Yeah, I’m up. What is it?”

“...I had a nightmare.” His breathing is getting better already; he’s able to talk without wheezing, something Techno’s quietly happy about. “Can you, um. Can you come sit with me?”

Techno rubs his eyes. He needs his glasses, before the small ache behind his eyes becomes an outright headache. “Yeah, sure. Gimme a sec.” He has to search in the dimly-lit cabin for wherever he placed his glasses last (he has a horrible habit of just... setting them down wherever when he takes them off, it was such a pain in the ass when they lived somewhere bigger) but he finds them sitting behind the sink, because of course they are.

Apparently, Tommy has become more patient in the last few months, because he doesn’t complain about the wait. He’s just sitting up in bed, hugging himself loosely, looking very small. For a moment, he wonders if he’s somehow gotten *younger* while he wasn’t looking, because that scared, small face is more fitting of the kid Phil brought home a decade or so ago.

He sits down on the edge of the bed and tilts his head at him. “Do you need to talk about it?” he asks, like he has the past few mornings. Yesterday, Tommy had woken in a panic again (not as bad as the first time he was lucid, but still bad) and he had to talk him down, which was especially hard, considering how the only thing he could say was *I’m sorry*.

Right now, he seems calmer, just... sad. He pulls his legs up to his chest and hugs them, all pale skin and bandages.

“Do you miss Wilbur?” he asks bluntly.

Techno could answer honestly, and say he does, because... *he does*.

He loved Wilbur more than words, in a complicated sort of way. Their relationship was hard and they spent more time fighting than anything else, but *fuck* if he didn’t adore his older brother, so intelligent and kind until madness and revenge and power warped his perceptions.

Even if Wilbur had hated him for a multitude of reasons, even if he thought he was a monster, they were still family, closely-knit, bonded over some of the worst experiences possible.

(Late nights talking very candidly about their mental health.

“I don’t want to kill myself, but...” Wilbur leans back on the roof’s wooden surface, holding a lit cigarette dangerously close to his wrist. His cream-white wings stretch out on the wood and look stark in the moonlight. “I don’t want to be here.”

“The voices want me to hurt you and Tommy and dad,” Techno admits all on one breath, burying his face in Wilbur’s stomach. “I don’t *want* to hurt you.”)

(Late nights where Wilbur would come home drunk and tired, giggling at a figure Techno didn’t bother to identify (it was Schlatt, it was *always* Schlatt) and he would be on the couch, waiting up for him, long after the younger kids were asleep.)

(The ruins. Techno coming home blood-soaked and dissociated, clutching a torn handful of Dream’s hoodie, unable to unclench his jaw in fear of screaming until he choked. Wilbur being the one who brought him inside, even though Phil was still there at the time, and washing the blood from his skin without words or pity.)

(Even meeting for the first time, they knew there was something similar about them. A wild desire to ruin things, even if only in a small way.)



But he could also lie, lock away those feelings, and say he doesn't.

"Honestly, Tommy?" He leans back on his hands, planted on the bed. "I don't know if I miss him."

His little brother nods along, his expression surprisingly mature. "I don't know either," he admits, hushed, like he doesn't want to be heard. "I mean, I miss him, 'cause he-- he practically raised me, you know? But... how he acted before he died... and sometimes when we were younger..." He hugs his legs closer to his chest, unbound right wing wrapping around his side. "He really scared me, sometimes."

He thinks about how, even before power corrupted him, their older brother was... unstable. It's not like Techno has any room to talk (voices aside, he has anxiety and layers of trauma thick enough to cut with a knife and all sorts of behavioral/attention problems) but with Wilbur it always held an edge of danger.

Techno is dangerous because he's strong and motivated for violence by mental/supernatural voices. Wilbur was dangerous because he couldn't control himself when he was mad.

"In my nightmare, he was just... *screaming* at me," Tommy continues, shivering at the memory. Techno shuffles closer and rests his hand on his arm, hesitant to do more without asking and not knowing *how* to ask. He's touched him very little, barring carrying him when he first found him and checking his wounds. "He was mad about... everything? I'm being lazy and not listening to him and not doing what he'd want me to do." He laughs, a quiet, odd little sound. "It's *stupid*."

He recalls his nightmare, waking up so panicked he had to bite himself to calm down, over a memory nearly seven years past.

"It's not stupid," he says, reaching out an arm. "C'mere. Do you want a hug?" That's a normal thing to ask, right? Especially for your traumatized brother? And even if it isn't, it's cold.

(And maybe he needs the hug, too.)

Tommy's eyes grow wide and he nods, straightening out his legs over the edge of the bed. He wraps his arms around Techno's middle and resting his head on his shoulder. He's warm, but not feverish, and shaking slightly.

"You're okay," he murmurs, running a hand through his hair. "It's not stupid that you got scared of Wil sometimes. Hell, he scared *me* sometimes."

He shuffles in closer, curled up against his side. He's very aware of how thin he is, and it makes him pull a face in concern. He knows a week won't be enough to reverse *however* long of not enough food, but it still worries him. Especially because Tommy doesn't eat unless told to.

"I don't think he ever *meant* to scare us," he shrugs as much as he can with how he's wrapped around his older brother. "Maybe in the *end*, he did. But when we were younger, I think he just... wanted us to listen." He pauses. "We were never very good at that. Me especially."

"Mhm," Techno agrees, fixing his eyes on the dwindling fireplace. "Remember how mad he got when you snuck off with Tubbo for two days? When you went to find that treehouse?"

Tommy laughs shakily. "Oh, fuck, he was pissed. Pretty sure he was still mad about that when he died."

"He was mad about a lot of things when he died," he sighs, resting his cheek against the top of

Tommy's head. The affection is... nice. He's a little bit touch-starved, because the only person he lets touch him is Phil. And... Tommy, now, he supposes. "...I think I miss him."

"Yeah. I mean, Ghostbur's... *fine* . But I kinda miss him when he was alive," he turns his face against his shoulder and sighs. "I miss his hugs."

He chuckles in agreement and gives him an only slightly awkward squeeze around the middle. "Go back to sleep, it's still early."

Just about the only thing that's easy about Tommy's recovery is getting him to sleep. He sighs heavily and climbs back under his covers, snuggling himself into the mattress.

(That's one of the things that's different about him. Tommy's never slept easily.

One of many things; like how he flinches away from the fire when it's too intense, how little he eats, how he stares at Techno like he expects him to attack.)

He pets back his bedhead, before leaving him to sleep.

—

"I'm bored," Tommy announces, later that afternoon.

"Well, unless your broken ankle has magically healed itself in the fifteen minutes since I checked it," Techno doesn't glance up from his book, reading the familiar words without taking them in, "you can't get up. Do you want something to read?"

"Reading is boring," he complains, crossing his arms. "I want to go outside."

"Too cold," he shakes his head. "You were hypothermic less than a week ago, and you're still sick. Letting you go outside would be a horrible idea."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

He raises his brows, pushing up his glasses. "Read a book, Tommy."

"Fuck you," he says, completely maturely. Techno chuckles and goes back to his book.

Tommy sighs, sinking back against the pillows. He's never done well having to just sit still and hang around. He's bored and antsy. If he wasn't sick, if he wasn't hurt... he'd get up and go exploring. Or something like that. Or go find Dream and blow up at him for all his bullshit.

For some reason, the idea isn't as satisfying as it was before. Dream wasn't... that bad. Sure, he... *hurt* him, but he also took care of him and sang him to sleep a few times and stayed with him even when everyone else ignored him. He was mean sometimes, but Tommy always deserved it.

His bound wing hurts.

Then maybe, if he could get up, he'd sneak into L'manberg. Sure, Dream would surely be lurking around somewhere, but he's fairly sneaky. He misses Tubbo so much, even if he might not miss him. And he misses Fundy and Ranboo and Quackity and Niki. He just— he misses *everybody* . He'd do about anything to see them.

Techno's fine company, he guesses, but every interaction they have feels weird. Tense. Mostly because anxiety comes off the piglin hybrid in waves, and because of how ill Tommy is. Both mentally and physically, haha.

He's still not convinced Techno won't throw him out as soon as he won't die from it.

Abruptly, his older brother stands from the armchair, head cocked as if he's listening to a far off sound, eyes locked on the window. His left ear twitches up, and his tail whips anxiously behind him.

Tommy's brow furrows. When he looks to the window, he can't see anything but snowy plains. "What is it?"

"Do you think you can climb a ladder?" He asks, not looking at him.

"Uh... maybe? Why?"

He drags his eyes from the window and stares at him. He's surprised and a little scared to see a bit of panic in his eyes. "I need you to go downstairs. Into that little room you made."

"What?" He shuffles to the end of the bed, putting his feet on the floor, a dark kind of excitement settling in his stomach. "Why, what's going on? What did you hear?"

"I don't have time, just-- get up," Techno storms over to the door and grabs his sword from where it's hanging next to his cloak. His hands are shaking.

Tommy crosses his arms and stares after him. "What's happening, Techno?"

He huffs. "It's Dream. I think, anyway." He rubs his ear and grimaces. "Just... we're playin' it safe. Go downstairs and stay there until I come get you."

*It's Dream.*

He swallows, steadying himself as much as he can as he gets up. He's all too aware of how cold it is, how none of his borrowed clothes fit, how he's unarmed and sick and hurt.

*Dream's coming. Run. Hide. He'll be so pissed at you for running away. Maybe even enough to break your other wing or just cut them both off. Or finally just **KILL YOU**.*

*HIDE.*

"Tommy," Techno insists. "I can hide you, but you have to get out of sight."

He nods and limps towards the ladder into the storage room. Techno doesn't follow him, pulling his cloak around his shoulders and securing the clasp at his throat. All traces of anxiety leave his face, smoothed into complete indifference.

He climbs down unsteadily (he can walk, but his ankle flares with pain every step and he'd rather not) and walks to the empty, black mouth of the tiny cave he made for himself. He swallows thickly again. Dull panic burns at the bottom of his stomach, in the back of his mind.

He goes down after grabbing one of the lanterns and covers the hole with stone. There's another lantern down there, completely burnt out; Techno must have brought it down when he found him.

God, he can't believe Dream is approaching them. Why did he think he'd be safe at all, here? Techno could easily just rat him out. He and Dream... aren't exactly friends anymore (he thinks about Techno crying over his cut hair and Dream mocking him every time they met after that and the curious scar on his arm) but they have a weird rapport. A sort of mutual... understanding?

*Would Techno tell him where I am? No, no, probably not. He's putting all this effort into keeping*

*me alive. He wouldn't tell him where I am, it'd be a waste of his time, and Techno does not waste time.*

*He wouldn't tell him. Right. Right?*

He sits down on the floor, pulling the lantern in close for some kind of warmth. He finds the enchanted sword (so he did steal one!) and takes it in hand. He doesn't think he could fight, even walking to the basement made him winded. But it comforts him anyway.

He can just hear Techno walking around, feet above him. He leans against the wall close to the ladder, trying to listen hard. His muscles are tense with the instinct to run.

Someone knocks on the door. It's opened, and he can hear Techno's calm-as-can-be greeting. "Dream."

"Hey, Technoblade," Dream replies just as calmly. Tommy recognizes the cool amusement in it. He pulls his legs up to his chest and hugs them, trying to regulate his breathing. "Going out?"

"Yeah. Why are you here?" Not beating around the bush at all.

"Just figured I'd check up on what you're doing. Got to make sure everything's going fine, right?"

Footsteps, entering the house. He notes that he didn't ask to be invited in; he can almost imagine Techno's split-second scowl at the impoliteness. It's almost enough to distract him from his panic.

"Nice little place you've got here. How's being retired from violence treating you?" False kindness, dripping off his words like honey. That's how he always talked to Tommy after he hurt him.

He can't get enough air. His wings hurt like someone has their hands around the bones, *pulling*.

"It's fine. I like the quiet and the free time," more footsteps, a chest opening. "What are you doin' in there?"

"Checking things out," the chest closes. "Have you been having company?"

"That's really none of your business, now is it?"

Too much silence. Another chest opens and shuts roughly.

"Technically, everything that happens on this server is *my business*. Have you been having company?" The anger in his voice is subtle, but he knows it so well. He wants to scream, and bites into his cheek to prevent it.

"Phil's visited a few times," he admits. Tommy fiddles with the sword, running his fingers along the shining, enchanted surface. Pressing the tips of his fingers against the sharp edge just enough to sting but not bleed. "That's all. I've been mostly alone."

"Hm," Footsteps, crossing just above him. Roughly where the bed is. His heart speeds up; is there any evidence that he's been sleeping there? No, of course not, it just looks like a messy bed. Right? God, his head's spinning.

The next question is seemingly random. "How are your hands, Techno?" Steeped with false concern. "I see a lot of bandages. Are they still hurting that badly?"

More quiet. Techno's foot taps. "Yeah, I-- I messed them up buildin' this place. It is what it is."

“Makes sense.” A floorboard creaks. “Are you sure?”

The foot-tapping gets louder. Tommy pulls his legs closer to his chest, resting his chin on them. He’s cold and panicky. “Yeah, I’m sure.” The door opens again. “Can you leave? I have to check on my bees.”

“One more thing. What’s downstairs?”

Tommy puts his hand over his mouth to keep from screaming. Dream *can’t* come downstairs. He’ll be too close, and Tommy won’t be able to keep quiet if he’s that close. He’ll start crying or screaming and he’ll get caught and--

“Storage room. I keep extra supplies down there.”

“Can I take a look?”

“Don’t see why, but sure.”

Tommy scrambles to the other side of the small room, as far from the ladder as possible. He keeps one hand over his mouth and wraps the other in his long hair, tugging at the soft strands at the back of his head. He’s so close. Any minute now, Dream will be just above him.

*He’s going to find me he’s going to find me he’s going to find me!*

He forces himself to breathe, even though every breath rattles, aching through his chest. It *hurts*, hurts almost as much as the sound of every footstep above him.

Dream’s voice is so, so fucking *close*. “What do you have so much enchanted gear for?”

Techno’s voice belies a slight irritation. “It never hurts to be prepared.”

“What are you preparing for? Hopefully not any more destruction.” A chest opens and closes.

“No, not really, just keeping myself safe. I’m a changed man, you know.”

Tommy breathes in sharply, pressing his back against the rough-hewn wall, as Dream crosses the room with sharp steps. He hears Techno huff with annoyance.

“Are you, really?” Dream asks, so quiet Tommy has to strain to hear it. The instinct to cling to the man’s words is so, so strong. He digs his fingers into his hair and pulls at it, hard, muffling himself on his hand as he begins to cry. “You’ve completely changed your ways? You’re not doing anything like before?”

“Is it really that unbelievable?” Techno replies, equally quiet.

“Knowing you? Yeah, it’s *really* unbelievable.” A sound he can’t identify, followed by Techno inhaling sharply. “Remember the temple, Techno? That’s why I can’t believe you.”

What feels like an hour of silence follows.

Tommy drops the hand from his hair to dig his fingers into his arm, blunt nails cutting into his skin to try and stop himself from falling apart. He feels blood well up and stain the shirt he borrowed from Techno. That’s fine. That’s *fine*. The two of them know how to get blood out of just about every fabric.

“I’ll be seeing you,” Dream says, voice too normal. “Have a nice rest of your day, Technoblade.”

He climbs the ladder. He can hear the trapdoor smack closed, and then the door after another moment or two.

Something clatters above him and Techno lets out a few seconds of absolutely *hysterical* laughter. The sound is almost inhuman, and he flinches further away from the ladder, fingers slipping against the slick blood on his arm.

The stone above him is removed, and the light from above is briefly blocked by Techno's form. "You can come up now, he's gone." His voice wavers slightly, like he's restraining some strong emotion. "C'mon, it's cold down there."

Tommy swallows a mouthful of saliva tinged with iron (he must have bitten through his cheek again) and struggles to his feet. He's shivering. He carries the lantern and the sword with him as best he can as he climbs the ladder.

He pauses halfway up and nervously taps his fingers against the wooden ladder. "Are you sure?"

"Mmm, yeah. He's gone, trust me." Techno sounds like he's still in the basement. Waiting for him.

He pulls himself up from the hole, sitting heavily on the cool stone floor. He's still panicky, though it's lessening. *Dream isn't there. Dream didn't find him. Dream is gone.*

He gets back to his feet, swaying heavily on his right side to keep himself stable. His arm and jaw and head all ache, and that's not even counting his already extant injuries. "I..." he swallows again, tasting more blood.

Techno doesn't look good. He's paler than usual, the circles under his eyes seeming a bit darker, and his hand rests on the hilt of his sword even now. His expression is flatly upset, eyes wide with something close to horror. There's a spot of blood on his lip.

He usually doesn't look so alarmed, and especially not after talking to Dream.

Tommy looks him over with furrowed brows, his concern for himself drifting away. "Are you alright?"

He swallows. "Yeah, I'm okay." His tired eyes look him over in return. "Are you? What happened to your arm?"

"Uh." His stomach twists and he looks at the blood on his arm, slick and dark against the light-blue fabric. "I got freaked out and hurt my arm..." His mouth tastes like blood and it's freaking him out a little. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay," Techno's hand leaves the hilt of his sword to scratch at his opposite palm, expression troubled. "Let's get you upstairs, back in bed."

He nods, and they climb up the ladder. He feels like something should be different about the living area, but it's just the same as before.

"Sit down, I'll clean up your arm." He's back to acting all businesslike, calm. If his hands weren't shaking and he wasn't still disheveled, he'd look perfectly normal. "And then I'll make lunch."

Tommy doesn't argue against it. He sits down on the edge of the bed and rests his arms on his knees, staring at the floor. Everything hurts from his fit and having to walk around made his breathing get all wheezy again. God, this is awful.

*Useless. Weak. You're a useless child.*

When prompted, he unbuttons his shirt and pulls it off of one arm. He doesn't really pay attention to the little cuts on his arm being cleaned and bandaged. It only barely registers as important. He has too much pain to focus on the new one.

He focuses on his breathing, which is steady again, at least. He doesn't feel... *safe* , but he feels safer . He doubts Techno would let Dream of all people do anything to him. The embarrassment of that is probably a motivation, more than keeping him safe.

He feels it when Techno lets go of him, saying something quietly as he steps away.

He stares at the floor some more, seeing Techno's boots disappear from his sight. He wears heels. Why does he even wear heels? Maybe just for the aesthetic. (Or maybe because he was always bitter about Tommy and Wilbur being taller than him. That was fun to pick on him for.)

"Hey," Tommy says, weakly. He presses his hands against his knees. "Can you give me a hug?" That morning was the first time they hugged this whole time, but he needs the stability of being held.

He steps back into his view, and when he manages to glance up, he can see the worried expression on his face. "Yeah, of course."

He wraps his arms around him, gentler than he would ever guess he could be, and pulls his head against his chest. He's warm, just like he always is, so unnaturally warm. He remembers, on cold winter evenings when he was little, curling up in Techno's lap just so he wouldn't freeze. He misses that, being small enough to be held like that.

Now he's just a ( *ugly stupid awkward horrible useless* ) lanky teenager with too long limbs and bad proportions and bad posture. Sometimes he wishes he was still small, that he could have frozen time when he was about nine and his whole family was still together.

This is nice, though. Sitting down like this, he can rest his head on Techno's chest and wrap his arms around his waist, pulling him as close as he dares. It's nice, to hold him and be held in return. He feels... he feels safe? Actually safe, not just safer . Because for all his faults, Techno is a good protector.

He isn't aware that he's crying again until Techno pets his hair back and shushes him softly. "It's okay. You're okay," he soothes, fingers carding through his grown-out hair, untangling the knots made by pulling it while he was hiding.

Tommy hiccups and clings to his cloak, hiding his face and his tears in the fabric of his shirt. He hums soothingly, the tune a little rough, but undeniably a form of comfort.

"I'm not any good at this," he admits quietly, still petting his hair. "But I'm here, 'kay? You're alright. You're stayin' with me, and you'll be safe here."

He sobs, pressing himself in closer, wanting to be protected from the awful world around him. Crying is worse, because it makes it harder to breathe, but he can't help it. He's so tired, and sad, and he feels useless and tiny.

"Please don't let him hurt me," he sobs out, not thinking about it. "Please, I can't-- I can't do *that* again--"

"Shhhh," he soothes, his hand dropping to rub his back. "I'm not going to let him hurt you. I mean

it, you're safe." He starts rocking him just slightly, gentle movements back and forth.

He grabs at the fabric of his shirt and practically melts into the affection, almost tipping off the bed as he leans into him. His uninjured wing stretches out and wraps around his older brother, trying to prevent him from leaving.

He doesn't know why he believes him, why he thinks *Technoblade* of all people would want to protect him, why he would even bother to, but he wants to believe him. He wants to believe he can actually be safe for once. That he's not just a useless child.

The sobs only get worse, and he's barely able to breathe for the wheezing and the tears.

"Deep breath, Toms, you're goin' to choke yourself," Techno strokes his hair back from his face again, pushing him back just a little so he has more space.

Tommy forces in a breath that's way too shallow. It's cut off with a harsh cry that hurts down to his core.

He smiles patiently anyway and nods. "Yeah, like that. One more time?" He actually manages a deep breath this time. It rattles, his lungs downright hurt, but at least he gets it right this time. The way his older brother's face lightens feels like sunlight in his chest. "Keep goin', you're great, Tommy."

By the time he's allowed to slump back against his chest, feeling drained, he's able to breathe evenly again.

"Ow," he mumbles, thick with tears and snot.

Techno chuckles, patting his head. "I'd imagine. Tired?"

He blinks against his shirt. "I don't want to sleep," he admits quietly. "Can I help you cook, or something?"

He pulls back a bit, still within arms reach. "Yeah, you can sit at the table and cut things. It's really cold out, so we can make stew for tonight, and I'll find somethin' for lunch." He helps him to his feet, and gently squeezes his shoulder. He wants to melt into the touch all over again.

"That sounds good," he replies quietly, his voice a little ragged from crying.

Techno holds him for a minute more, before leaning down to press a kiss between his eyes. (Like Phil used to when he was little, like Wilbur used to do before bed every night.)

He swallows another wave of emotion. "Can I have an apple?"

He grins. His smile is crooked; one side of his mouth rises higher than the other. "Of course. C'mon, let's cook."

## Chapter End Notes

i am going to go take a nap now thank you

comments of any kind make me go :-)) but esp long ones so if you want my undying



affection pls leave a long comment (/j, you all have my undying affection anyway!  
because i love you!)

# shout at the wall, 'cause the walls don't fucking love you

## Chapter Notes

DOUBLE UPDATE REAL??????

haHA bet y'all didn't expect chapter 6 so fast!! this has actually been written the longest out of everything posted; it's the reason tommy has wings in this au, after all

did you come to this fic for pain? yes? GOOD. this chapter is essentially just hurt/comfort, except like. bad comfort. the person doing the hurting is also doing the comforting. is dark hurt/comfort a thing? it should be.

holy shit dream is SO awful in this chapter it was so fun to write. that sounds fucked up but like. its the truth

but yes this chapter is,,, pretty heavy. like, this is all a flashback chapter about what happened to tommy's wing, with no real lightness to break it up. this event is really like. the end of tommy's sanity. it's the reason he's (waves) like that.

for timeline purposes, this happens a few days before dream destroys logstedshire. it's one of the reasons tommy leaves.

if you don't want to read this chapter-- because it deals with emotional/physical abuse, manipulation, gaslight-y themes, etc-- i will provide a summary in the end notes to catch you up! stay safe!

title from jubilee line by wilbur soot

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Get the fuck back here!"

Dream's voice is sharp, like the axe in his hand, dripping with the same ruby-red blood that falls from Tommy's lacerated shin.

His wings beat viciously as he flies higher, higher. His leg feels a little numb, and blood pours down his leg. Honestly, he feels lightheaded and tired, but he has to stay away from the masked man below him.

He turns toward the nearest tall tree, wings flapping lightly as he settles atop it. He knows-- he knows he can't stay here. He can't go back to L'manberg, but he can-- he can just *run*, right? The whole world is open to him. He can-- he can just fly away like he's always kinda wanted to do.

(A thousand years ago, he and Tubbo had discussed it. It was during his time in Pogtopia, when Wilbur was constantly on the verge of madness, when everything was so horrible.

"If we leave, we *have* to go together." Tubbo said firmly, tangling their fingers together and resting his forehead on Tommy's shoulder. "I don't know if I could manage without you."

They had only decided not to run because Tommy couldn't leave Wilbur, insane as he was becoming. Because Wilbur was *still* his older brother, regardless of what was wrong with him.

He regrets it.)

He sits down on a thick branch, keeping himself vigilant, and rummages in his bag to grab bandages, which he keeps plenty of. He wraps his leg, carefully tightening the bandage around his shin to press the cut skin back together.

*I've gotten pretty good at this*, he thinks, trying not to look at his bandaged forearms.

"Tommy!" Dream shouts, somewhere to his left. Not far. He's getting closer.

He should get back into the air. Maybe, he could... he could go find Philza? They've never been the closest-- Wilbur and Techno were always much closer with their father, even though he's sure he loves him just as much. But in this situation, he would surely help him, right? He's still his *son*. They're still family, right? He could help him...

Tommy shivers when he hears Dream's axe slam into a nearby tree. He needs to fly away. He even gets to his feet on the branch, sneakers pressing against the wood and making the bark crackle slightly. His wings spread out behind him, tan and white and grey. The feathers are a little greasy with neglect, but they're still serviceable. More than, really.

He doesn't have time to go back and get anything from his secret room, but that's fine.

He could just. Go. Step off the branch and. Take off. He can outpace Dream with his wings.

"Get back here, come on." Less anger, now-- more... concerned? "We can talk. I'm not mad anymore, come back."

For some reason, it makes him hesitate. Talking it out might be nice. Dream is his friend, right?

They could talk about it. They could talk about it over food and then Dream could sit next to him and pet back his hair like he's done the past few nights, making him feel like a little kid and like he's not a damaged teenager who no one loves.

He's been so lonely, and Dream is really, *really* nice sometimes.

"Come on, Tommy." Dream is nearby, probably only feet away. He could just drop down from the tree and be seen.

Tommy sits back down, pulls his legs up onto the branch. Who is he kidding? Leaving would be a horrible idea. Phil doesn't want him, doesn't care that he's all alone. Ghostbur hasn't been around in days. Techno doesn't care, either. His family has abandoned him.

*And so has Tubbo...*

He hugs his legs, pressing his arm hard against his wounded leg just to feel the pain. God, he's so *stupid*.

"I'm over here, Dream," he calls quietly.

Through a break in the trees, he can see Dream's white mask. "What are you doing up there?" He asks, way, way too friendly. "Are you alright?"

Tommy presses his arm harder into the wound. Blood is already seeping through the bandage.

"Yeah," he lies. "I'm sorry I tried to run away. It was stupid."

"It was, I'm not going to lie to you." Dream strolls over to the tree, looking up at him. He can't see his eyes, but he can feel the weight of his gaze. "I'm sorry I cut you, though. That was stupid too."

He sighs. "I deserve it," he mumbles. "You were just trying to stop me." It's not like it's the first time he's hurt him. He can't count how many times he's grabbed his wrist hard to stop him from doing something or slapped him or pulled his hair when he wasn't paying enough attention. And that's not even counting taking all his stuff...

(That morning he woke up to Dream holding his head under the water, the sky black in the pre-dawn, his blank mask somehow portraying malice--)

"C'mon, get down from there," Dream says softly, reaching up a hand to help Tommy down.

He takes his hand, oddly appreciating how long and calloused his fingers are. He's reminded of Wilbur's hands, and it makes his stomach hurt. "Are you mad at me?" he asks, intertwining their fingers. Dream doesn't stop him, and it feels nice.

"Not really," he says, leading him back towards Logstedshire. "I get it, y'know? You're lonely, you're lashing out. You're *sixteen*, dude." He laughs lightly.

He laughs too, but he isn't amused. He feels a little sick, but that isn't new. "That's good, thank you," he smiles shakily.

They walk, quietly, for a few moments. Tommy flew further than he expected, and it's evident in how sore his wings are. He hasn't flown in a while.

(In fact, the last time he really did was with Tubbo. He had finally convinced him he wouldn't drop him if he flew carrying him, and while it had been a very short flight, it had been nice. Really nice.

Maybe he just wants Tubbo to cling to him again. He'd never complain about it now. He'd do just about anything to have him all cuddled up to him again, safe and happy.)

"Tommy?" Dream asks, still light. "You're not going to try and run away again, are you?"

Tommy hugs himself, pulling his wings in tight to his back, and focusing his eyes on the ground. "I don't think so," he says, too quiet. He's aware he's changed, and it makes him sick. He can barely recognize his memories of himself from a few months ago. "It's not like I have anywhere to go," he adds, because it's true.

What could he do? Show up at Techno's house, wherever it is, risking his life because Techno *does not like him*? (he doesn't blame him; he's a rotten, useless child and he betrayed him so viciously.) Find where Phil has built his own new place and be a burden on him all over again? (like he wasn't the reason he left in the first place.)

(Kill himself and wander around as a confused ghost just like Wilbur--?)

(He's considered that one, actually.)

"Exactly," Dream's fingerless-gloved hand settles atop his head and ruffles his hair. It feels nice, and he closes his eyes. "I'm the only person who cares about you, you know that, don't you?"

The words aren't *kind*, but they are generally truthful. He nods along.

Dream's hand drops from his hair to his back, settling in between his wings. The contact, even through his jacket and shirt, makes his skin crawl-- he really doesn't like people touching his wings, or his back in general. It took him years to even trust *Tubbo* enough to touch them, and that was something his best friend was very grateful for.

The fact that Dream is doing it so nonchalantly makes him feel... something. A bad feeling settles into his stomach.

The leather of his glove scratches against his coat. He bites his tongue to keep from complaining. The affection, the physical contact, feels so good, but he doesn't *want* Dream to touch his wings.

Suddenly, there are fingers combing through the thick, fluffy feathers on his wing, close to the base of it, and then *curling* around the top, around a bone.

It doesn't hurt, so much as feel... really, *really* violating. He doesn't let *anyone* touch his wings like that, not since he was small and needed help to preen them, and even then, he only let Phil do it. (That's ignoring the few times Tubbo had helped him; but that was different, because he trusts him.

He doesn't trust Dream like that.)

*What's going on?*

"What are you doing?" he asks, voice hovering somewhere between panic and outright terror. He isn't sure what Dream's planning, but he knows it can't be good.

"I," he starts, fingers settling a bit more firmly around his wing. The leather feels weird. "am going to make sure you won't run away again."

He doesn't understand, because he just said he won't. He only tried because he was frustrated. He *just* said he knows it's stupid.

He pulls at his wing, and the *snapping* sound comes before the pain registers. It only really felt like he pulled, so what was that *sound* ?

The pain hits him like a blow to the face a few seconds later.

It's so much that it immediately becomes nausea, and he stumbles almost drunkenly away from Dream, bracing his hands on a tree as his vision blurs and twists and bile burns at his throat.

It feels like a nightmare. All he can focus on is the pain and how one of his wings is clearly broken in some way.

Because while one can move just fine, coming up to protectively wrap around that side of his body in response to his emotions (a self-soothing gesture he shares almost exactly with Phil) the left one hangs crookedly from his back, every minute twitch of muscle sending pain through his entire body.

It's broken in such a way that the feathers almost touch the ground, which doesn't make sense because they're not-- *long* enough to touch the ground...

*Dream broke my wing, Dream broke my wing, Dream broke my wing with his bare hand like it was **nothing** , oh **god** how is he strong enough to do that?!*

The only person he's ever met who's strong enough to break bone with their hands is Technoblade,

and that's only because he isn't fully human. Even so, he's not able to do it with *one hand*, and never so casually. Dream... is only *debatably* human, but he looks and moves like one, so how the *fuck* is he strong enough to snap bone *with one hand*?

God, it *hurts* .

He chokes on a sob and his legs give out. He falls on his knees and tries to breathe evenly, because he's somehow aware that having a panic attack really isn't going to help in this situation, but it's hard. Because every movement he makes only sends more pain through him.

He feels sick. Dream snapped his wing like it was nothing, like it was a fucking stick, and the horror, the *violation* that he feels is visceral. He feels like he did far more than break his wing; he feels like he broke open his chest and touched his organs, fucked up something permanent and intimate and private inside of him.

The only other time he's ever hurt his wings is when he was very small. He was six or seven, and still learning how to fly. He had made the mistake of trying to fly when it was too windy. Phil hadn't been home to stop him, Wilbur had gone inside to get something to drink, and Techno was asleep under a nearby tree with a sunhat covering his face.

It was just Tommy and the open sky.

He had leaped from their porch into the air, giggling because he felt so, so *free* , and climbed higher and higher just for the joy of it all.

It had just taken a shift of the wind, and some muscle was pulled the wrong way, and he went down *hard* .

That had been a bad day. He broke his arm, bruised a few ribs, and injured a muscle in his left wing. Everyone had panicked and fussed over him. The attention made him both pleased and sick to his stomach, even at that age. He's never really liked that attention, as much as he pined for it.

Even then, it wasn't really a bad injury. Not like this, not like the obvious broken bone (bones?) that he can clearly feel digging into the inside of his wing.

He feels both too fuzzy-headed to know what's going on and hyperaware of everything; the broken pieces of bone, the rocky dirt digging into his knees through his torn pants, the throbbing wound on his leg, the blood matting into his feathers. How his stomach turns with nausea from both the amount of pain and the betrayal he feels. The fact he'll never fly again, surely...

He wants to be held, and the worst part is that Dream seems to know that.

"Hey, it's alright," the masked man says gently, and a pair of warm arms wrap around him. He has no energy to pull away, but he mentally rears back with horror. Why is he trying to hug him? *Oh god, is he going to break the other one?* He's not sure he could take it. "I know it hurts, but I had to do it. For your safety, y'know? I have to keep you safe."

*For your safety.*

Tommy was told that a lot, growing up-- as his father and older brothers would snatch away weapons and potions and other dangerous things, or when he was pulled away from wandering too far, even after Philza— always so protective, to the point of building walls around their home— had left them and he was under his older brothers' supervision.

(He remembers Wilbur taking away a fancy, pretty knife he had found while messing around in his

room, and saying exactly what Dream did.

*"For your safety, y'know? I have to keep you safe."*

Fingers prod at the base of his broken wing, and he *screams*, thrashing in the arms holding him, nausea only quelled by the fear of what Dream would do to him if he got sick.

"Shh, shh," Dream soothes, hugging him around the waist with one arm and inspecting his wing with the other. "I need to see how bad it is. Sit *still*, Tommy, jeez."

He can't form words. There's nothing but primal horror and pain coursing through him. He can't escape, because he's stronger than him and he's touching his wings and he just broke one of them and he's trying to hug him and-- and--

*I'm never going to fly again because of this man.*

Tommy crosses some line into hysteria, or *something*, because he's suddenly sobbing like never before, not even like when he was alone for the first time after his exile or when Wilbur died or when he realized Philza had left them when he was ten or hell, even when he was abandoned the first time as a fucking five-year-old.

(Is this why Wilbur lost his mind? He doesn't blame him.)

He needs comfort and the only option he has is Dream, so he throws himself against the man's chest and clings to him, wailing into his shoulder like a baby, because it hurts and everything is wrong.

"Oh, Tommy, it's okay." His hand stops messing with his broken wing, and he's brought carefully into his lap, a hand settling in his hair and stroking back the dirty, blonde strands. "Shhh, it's alright, you can cry on me. I've got you."

And it doesn't matter that Dream is the one who caused this pain, or that he's not even a good replacement for his dad or his older brothers or his best friend or really anyone. He's there, and he's warm, and he's hugging him, and that's all he can really ask for.

He clutches handfuls of his green jacket and sobs into his shoulder, choking on both the pain and his misery.

The hand in his hair doesn't cease, pulling through the tangles gently. His other hand settles on his back and his thumb rubs circles on him through his shirt. He rests his head against his own, and he murmurs meaningless comfort as he cries.

"It's okay, little bird. I'm not going anywhere." The nickname makes him gag (no one calls him nicknames except Tubbo, and Wilbur when he's feeling especially affectionate) but the reassurance feels good, in a fucked up sort of way. Because even though Dream is awful, even though he's cruel, he's really all Tommy has now.

Dream kisses his forehead, and that's *awful*, but it feels good too.

He isn't sure how long it takes for him to calm down. He cries long enough that his throat hurts, and his mouth feels sore, and he's sure he's made a mess of Dream's hoodie. There are both dried and still-wet tears on his cheeks, and his nose is all snotty. He feels gross, like a little kid who threw a fit because he didn't get his way.

"I'm s-sorry," Tommy hiccups, pulling away and trying to dry his own face. "I'm sorry, Dream, p-

please don't be mad at me..."

"No, no, hey, it's alright." Dream's hands cup his face and he rubs his cheek with his thumb. "I'm not mad, little bird, promise."

He has his mask moved aside, and that feels significant, because Tommy's never seen his face. His hood got knocked down at some point, and he has messy, light brown hair, pulled back into a ponytail, but he's seen that before.

The sun's going down, so he can't see that well, but he can see his bright-green eyes (one is slightly clouded-- blind?) and the freckles on his cheeks, and a stark pink-and-white scar across the middle of his face, starting on one cheekbone and stretching over to the opposite. When he smiles, he can see his sharp teeth, his slightly oversized fangs.

He looks younger than he expected, and there's a slight inhuman quality to his face. His skin is too smooth, his freckles too uniform, his eyes a shade too deep.

The fact Tommy can see his face at all makes something a little like pride bloom in his chest, though. It's warming, comforting, like a drink of hot tea on a cold day. Dream trusts him with his appearance, even after he ran away and cried on him and made a mess.

Dream *trusts* him.

"C'mon," Dream says quietly, pressing a kiss between his brows (it makes him flinch, because Wilbur and Phil both used to do that, and it's *so* fucked up that he's doing it now, but it feels good, safe, *familiar* ) before getting up to his feet and helping Tommy up as well. "We'll get you cleaned up, and find some dinner. How does that sound?"

He nods. Everything's fine-- Dream isn't mad at him, his wing is going to be patched up, he's going to be alright. Maybe he can get him to stay while he goes to bed.

He doesn't know if he can sing, but he might ask.

That would be nice.

## Chapter End Notes

### SUMMARY:

tommy impulsively attempts to fly away from dream and his exile, in the process getting wounded. (the cut on his leg mentioned in previous chapters) dream comes after him before he can actually get too far away, and they start walking back to logstedshire.

in an attempt to completely stop this from ever happening again, dream breaks one of tommy's wings. tommy promptly breaks down over this, spiraling to the point of basically losing his mind. (this takes place towards the end of everything, so this was essentially the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak)

he seeks comfort from dream, crying and in a lot of pain (of course) and dream is all too happy to provide it, while also beating him down subtly for trying to leave in the first place.

this chapter is the MOST outright depressing lmao. sad hours lads.



anyway! i plan to take a bit of a break from posting for a little maybe? dfkljfglkd i've posted all 6 of these chapters in just abt a week and i've definitely burnt myself out a little. so maybe there will be a significant gap between this one and the next? (maybe. i might ignore this goal for myself)

thank you very much for reading this far!!!! i love you very much, go drink some water!!!

# you know i've tried hard to love me too

## Chapter Notes

i hope y'all came to this fic for uncomfortable family dinners and too much backstory and sadness!

yes i said i was taking a break but my adhd has said that THIS fic is the only thing we can focus on so we're writing again! dw abt it im doin great

this is,,, not my best chapter, its kinda clunky, but it's the longest one, so that's pretty cool :-) it's got plot stuff, too! also some fluff kind of i think!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Getting used to living with Techno full-time is... weird.

Mostly because Techno is so, so *quiet* . Quieter than ever before. (Well, kind of. There was a few months when he was a teenager where he was completely nonverbal, but that was after something happened with him and Dream, so Tommy's not faulting him for that.)

He's only rarely talkative, and being isolated and alone seems to have made it even worse. He often doesn't respond to Tommy rambling at him to fill the silence with more than nods or hums.

It's... unnerving, almost. It's like he *can't* talk. Sometimes, the extended silences are punctuated by him sighing in frustration at himself as he tries to say something, but just can't find the sounds for it. It worries him, a little.

(Only a little.)

He never makes Tommy get up when he does, but he has the weirdest sense that he's up with the sun. He always looks exhausted, eyes lidded and shadowed with purple, often squinting even with his glasses on.

Tommy wonders if he still has nightmares.

(This question is answered two and a half weeks into his stay, when he's jolted from his own sleep to the sound of muffled crying. He lays, paralyzed with worry, underneath his blankets.

He swallows anxiously. "Techno?" he calls.

The crying ceases immediately. "Yeah?" His voice is barely choked.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine, Toms. Go back to sleep."

In the morning, Techno is still asleep when Tommy manages to drag himself out of bed. He doesn't have the heart to wake him, curled up in the armchair with a blanket draped over him and a pillow held in his arms. His hair is loose and free to frame his face; it makes him look younger.

He ends up letting him sleep until noon. It's well worth the scolding he gets; it's the most awake he's seen him the whole time he's been here.)

After Dream visits, after seeing how much it affected both of them, he starts to force himself out of bed more often. He hadn't, for that first week, because he was too tired. Everything ached and even *breathing* was trouble.

But along with being very, *very* bored, Tommy kind of feels like he owes his older brother... something, some kind of payment for making him deal with that and him and— y'know. Everything.

He can't do much. Standing up to do a lot of chores is too tiring, and hurts his broken ankle more than he'd like to admit. His wounds all still bother him, though the majority have healed pretty well. Anything too physically taxing leaves him wheezing, because he hasn't gotten too much better in that respect. (At least the fever's gone.) He can't cook even when he's not hurt.

So he cleans. Very small things, at first; he picks up the books Techno leaves on the table, he puts away a few things here and there. It just feels... right. It gives him something to do, so it's good.

Walking is painful, but he's stable enough, and the more he walks, the less it hurts. He's pretty sure walking on a week-and-a-half-since-broken ankle isn't medically advised, but honestly, neither are ninety-nine percent of the things they do, so he's working with that in mind.

It takes Techno, who's both oddly attentive and constantly in his own head, two days to notice him cleaning up, and that's only because he sees him clearing the table after dinner.

"I can get that, y'know," he says from the sink, rinsing the pan he cooked in. "You don't have to do all that walkin'."

"I want to," he says, carrying over the dishes from the table. "Sitting around is really boring. Might as well do something... helpful." He hands over the dishes, which are promptly rinsed and set aside to be washed later.

A few moments of silence pass, with only the running water making a sound.

Techno shuts off the tap and gives him a cautious smile. "Thank you."

He blinks, hesitantly returning the smile. "You're welcome."

The exchange is very stiff, but it's... genuine, at least.

From there, Tommy does more. Chores are tiring, but he likes doing something with all his free time as he heals. He feels like antsy if he's doing something, he's always been like that. In other times, he's sure he'd be adventuring or building or something to keep himself busy, but for now, chores are fine.

He learns he actually really likes doing laundry. Washing stains out of clothes is oddly soothing, and folding helps steady his hands. And the soap Techno has for clothes smells really nice. (Like home.)

"Lucky for you," Techno says, teasing but not mean at all. "I *hate* washin' clothes. That can be your job."

So Tommy does the laundry and picks up things Techno forgets to put away (he has a bad habit of leaving his books out and not putting away his shoes) and does other little things like make sure the

lanterns have enough oil and the table is set.

It's easy work. But it keeps him busy, keeps him from thinking too hard. It makes him feel... useful. Useful is good.

He can almost forget about what happened to him. He can pretend, sometimes, especially when he's folding things and Techno is quietly reading nearby, that this is normal, that they're back home again. Like Wilbur is just in the next room writing or practicing, like Phil's in the kitchen cooking and humming lightly to himself as he does. It feels like they're back at home.

(Does that home still exist? The comfortable little place Phil built for himself and his sons, oh so long ago? With walls high enough to protect them, even in his absence?

Maybe they could go back.

He'd like to go back.)

"You wanna help me with dinner?" Techno asks from the kitchen, rummaging through a chest. "Phil says he's comin' over."

Tommy glances back at him from where he's hanging clothes to dry near the fire. (He'd do a lot for a real clothesline, but as often as it storms and freezes out here, he can work with this.) "Yeah, in a minute. Does he... visit a lot?"

"As much as he can," his older brother pulls something from the chest and sets it on the counter. "He can't leave L'manberg *too* often. They don't know I'm out here, and I don't think they'd like knowin' he's been here with me."

Tommy doesn't know how to handle the hot resentment that burns in his stomach very suddenly at the words. Phil hadn't visited him *once* during his exile. Probably because he was too busy with Techno or something selfish for himself.

He swallows thickly and places his last clothespin on the shoulder of a shirt. "Probably not," he replies quietly.

He's not... *upset*, anymore. Okay, *yes* he's upset, but he's accepted the resentment that he always feels on some level towards Phil and Techno's relationship.

(He knew from a young age that Techno was the favorite, but it was okay, because back then he had Wilbur and Tubbo with him all the time. Now, he doesn't know how he'll handle all the time around the two of them.)

They make dinner. Tommy still doesn't have much of an appetite and can't eat a lot, though he makes himself eat often enough, but it's nice to cook (with help, of course— again, he can't cook alone) and the task seems to make Techno relax even more.

That's another thing. Despite obviously being anxious— for a lot of reasons, likely— Techno seems so much more comfortable now than he has ever before. The tension in his shoulders, the posture of a warrior; it seems to melt away, now. It's weird.

Techno's communicator beeps, and he glances at the message idly. (He barely ever uses the thing; it's existence is more of a formality than anything else. Tommy is only a little jealous, because he broke his a long time ago.)

He clicks his tongue. "He says he's bringing Ghostbur. Great." He sets the device down with a

sigh and rubs his temples one-handed, the other prodding the meat in the pan.

Tommy winces. "I dunno, I kinda missed him..."

"I did too, but..." he hesitates. "I think it would be pretty easy for him to let it slip that you're here. And you're... still supposed to be wherever it was you were exiled to."

He fiddles with the knife he was using to cut potatoes. "I guess. He doesn't have much of a filter..." he goes back to chopping. "Should I just hide the whole time?" It's only half a joke.

Techno snorts, elbowing him lightly. (He always touches him so gently. It would make him mad if he wasn't so goddamn touch-starved.) "Nah. You'd freeze to death downstairs at this time of night. And Phil wants to see you, so I suppose we'll just have to take our chances."

Tommy tries to frown, but it transforms into an involuntary smile at the idea of his dad actually *wanting* to see him. (God, he has daddy issues.) "I guess so."

Within the hour, they have dinner ready on the stove, and Tommy stubbornly pretends he's not picking at his nails from anxiety. Why did Techno have to mention how much Ghostbur could expose them? What a dick move, really. Now he's nervous.

"You're gonna make your hands bleed," Techno says, glancing at him with raised brows. He looks down, and sees that he's right; he's made his cuticle bleed. "What's wrong?"

He sticks his stinging index finger in his mouth, frowning. "You made me nervous," he complains thickly. "Bitch."

"It's not my fault," he replies, gently ruffling his hair. "Do you want me to put your hair up?"

He nods enthusiastically, wanting to see what can be done with his usually-loose hair. (He doesn't even realize how smoothly he distracted him from his anxiety.) Techno sits him down at the table and starts brushing out his hair.

"You guys would never let me grow my hair out when we were younger," Tommy muses, closing his eyes against the brush running through his hair, "why? I think I look great."

"Honestly? Wilbur didn't want to help you keep up with it," he works through a tangle gently. "I offered to do it, but y'know how he was about you."

He thinks about it for a minute, and sighs, slumping slightly. "Yeah, I know." Thinking about Wilbur hurts; he keeps having nightmares about him. Either his death, or him being mad at him for whatever reason, or that awful fight they had, or... "Thank you."

Techno brushes his hair back from his face and acknowledges him with a hum. "Do you want a ponytail or a braid?"

"Oh, is it long enough for a braid? I want a braid."

"Mmm, pretty much," he sets the brush down and starts sectioning his hair. "I'm goin' to believe that your enthusiasm for long hair came from all your time around me."

He scowls. "It absolutely did not come from you. This is an independent enthusiasm, completely unrelated to you and your fucking *three feet* of hair."

He laughs, a bit louder than usual. "My hair isn't that long yet. Soon enough it'll be there." He

starts on braiding his hair, as carefully as he can. “Y’see, I haven’t gotten a haircut in, like, eight years.”

“Yeah, I remember,” he rolls his eyes, wincing as he pulls a little too hard. “Ouch. Why don’t you want to cut your hair?” “I don’t really know. I’ve never liked haircuts, and I think I look better with long hair. Phil never forced it, and neither did Wilbur.” He pauses, thoughtfully. “Well, he tried once.”

“And how did that go?”

“I bit him.”

Tommy laughs and doesn’t even feel bad when he starts coughing. “Why can I-- ow my lungs-- why can I imagine you just chomping at him?”

“Because I did it a lot,” Techno chuckles, finishing the small braid and securing it. “Like, a *lot*. He didn’t really get my boundaries when we were little, so I ended up having to scare him off.”

“Maybe that’s why he was so scared of you,” he says, reaching up to touch the braid. “He was just scared of your teeth.”

He grins down at him, baring all of his teeth mockingly. They are *intimidatingly* sharp. “Maybe. Go take a look.”

More excited than he rightfully should be, Tommy hops up from the chair, gives Techno a beaming smile, and walks as quickly as he can to the bathroom.

He hasn’t really... looked at himself in the mirror much, lately. He doesn’t strictly *avoid* his own face, but he just doesn’t look at himself much. He doesn’t have a lot of self confidence, and he usually just makes sure he doesn’t look horrible.

His hair is definitely better than it was before he got here. Somehow, Techno managed to untangle its messy, nearly matted knots without damaging it too much, and it looks... actually healthy. He touches the loose strands of his bangs, and they’re all soft and curly. He isn’t sure that his hair has ever looked this nice.

All the cuts on his face have healed, leaving scars on his skin. He touches them warily. There’s even a scar on his lip from that split he had for months. (Dream... he thinks Dream might have punched him? He can’t remember a lot of what he did, but he thinks that’s right.)

He’s gotten really skinny. He can feel his ribs when he even brushes his own chest with his palm, and his joints are very prominent. He’s always been lanky and a little on the thin side, but this... he looks like he’s been starving. (He kind of has been. Unintentionally, but still.)

Even in borrowed clothes that hang off his thin figure, though, he looks... nice. Or, he thinks he does, at least.

He carefully stretches out his wings as much as the small room allows. He tried to clean them up some the other day, but since he hasn’t had any time to stretch them, it was just more painful/uncomfortable than anything.

He briefly runs his fingers over the greasy feathers and winces. He’s been neglecting them because of the pain that moving the bound one involves.

(He’s not very proud of how much he unraveled when Techno had to redo his bandages. He had

physically thrown himself across the room to avoid him, and it was the first time in his stay that he was genuinely *angry* at him.

“Do you want to make it worse, Tommy?” Techno asked, jaw and shoulders both tense. “Just let me help you.”

He understood the anger afterwards, but in the moment, he was terrified, putting his arms over his face and hiding behind them.

They didn’t talk much that day.)

He sighs, giving himself one more look in the mirror before leaving the bathroom. Techno’s standing near the window and messing with his hair, staring between the blinds. He looks like he’s barely in reality; he does that a lot, he always has.

“Hey,” Tommy calls, tapping his arm as he stands next to him. “Are you paying attention to anything? Can I insult you without you noticing?”

“Don’t be a brat,” Techno mumbles, still staring out the window. He chuckles and sticks his tongue out at his back, for the sheer childish joy of it. “Looks like it’s goin’ to storm. Where are they...?”

He wants to roll his eyes at the obvious concern. “Am I allowed to go outside? Just on the porch, for a minute?” He had managed to weasel his way into very brief trips outside for the last two days, usually no further than the porch steps. The cold air feels really good in his always-sore lungs, even if too long outside makes his breathing get rough again.

He glances back at him, brows furrowing. “...for a minute, yeah. Take my cloak, I’m not lettin’ you freeze to death.”

He gives a victorious laugh and grabs the blue garment from the wall next to the door, wrapping it around his shoulders as he steps outside.

The sky is a stormy blue, full of heavy clouds and only the faintest glow of the setting sun. A brisk wind blows, pushing his bangs off of his face and freezing him down to the bones. It feels good. He kind of sees why Techno likes living out here. It’s weirdly... peaceful.

He closes his eyes and tilts his head back towards the sky and the thick clouds, sighing. The wind feels nice on his face.

For a moment, he feels completely calm. It’s been so long since he’s felt calm. (Moments like when Techno hugs him do not count, simply because they are embarrassing.)

“Tommy?”

Oh, he knows that voice. He’s heard it’s living echo in his dreams for a while now.

Instinctively, he flinches, looking back down from the sky, only to meet Ghostbur’s empty white eyes.

“Hi,” he says, waving a hand. It’s a little halfhearted; he’s still nervous about him ratting him out.

The ghost of his older brother is standing on the porch steps, eyes wide with delight. His black hair glows in the mellow lantern-light, and the blue staining on his fingertips and chest looks bright. His ghostly, fluffy-edged wings are spread out wide. He’s grinning, showing off unsettlingly white

teeth against his greyed skin.

“You’re here!” he chirps, hopping up the last few steps, throwing his arms and wings around Tommy in a tight hug. He tries not to stumble; he’s not nearly as heavy as he was when he was alive, not even close, but he’s apparently substantial enough to knock a sickly teenager off balance.

“Yeah,” he responds quietly, returning the hug. Ghostbur is so, so cold, even for this snowy biome. It’s disturbing, a constant reminder that he’s hugging a ghost, a specter, a spirit in the form of someone he loved...

He’s making this way more depressing than it needs to be.

“How did you get out here? Dream said you were still in Logstedshire-- I meant to come and see you again, but I got busy!” He gives him a tight squeeze around the shoulders and kisses his forehead. His lips are like ice. “Were you lonely?”

Tommy nods, carefully, not knowing what information to expose. “Yeah, I was... lonely. Come inside, Techno said he thinks it’ll storm. Where’s Phil? Isn’t he supposed to be with you?”

“He won’t be long,” Ghostbur shrugs, fiddling with his slightly oversized sleeves. “He left a little bit after me. I think he was talking to someone, I can’t remember. But he’ll be here soon!”

They enter the house. Compared to outside, it’s almost uncomfortably warm, and Tommy removes his borrowed winter gear as fast as possible.

“Hello, Technoblade!” Ghostbur says cheerfully, waving a hand at their brother, who’s taking food to the table with a kind of distracted concentration on his face. “How are you? You’re wearing your glasses again! Been writing or something?”

Techno shrugs, setting a plate down with a mild clatter. “Nah, I’ve been cooking. Nice to see you, Ghostbur.” His voice carries an odd tone, and when he glances at Tommy, he thinks they’re feeling the same thing. It entirely seems to go over the ghost’s head, though.

“It’s nice to see you, too! Oh, the house looks really nice, much cleaner than last time. Have you two been having fun?” He floats a few inches off the floor as he rambles at them, waving his hands and his wings fluttering.

“We’re fine.” Techno’s getting quiet again, fidgeting with the silverware. He looks unhappy. Uncomfortable. Tommy isn’t sure if he gets it entirely, but he understands it. Ghostbur brings up... a lot of feelings. “What have you been doing?”

“I’ve been trying to spend more time with Fundy,” he waves his hands a bit more enthusiastically. “It’s hard, and he doesn’t want to talk to me a lot, but he’s a good kid, and I apologized to him for whatever Alivebur did...”

“That’s good, I’m glad...” he sets the silverware down and sits down at the table, running a hand through his hair. It’s down, and it’s impressively long. Tommy is a little tiny bit jealous of it.

A small knock comes from the door, and Phil steps into the house, looking particularly calm. When his eyes catch sight of his sons, he smiles and calls a greeting, taking off his coat and hat.

Tommy doesn’t know how to react to how much it warms him, that simple and very familiar smile. (Again: he has some serious daddy issues.)

He tilts his head at Tommy in particular, his smile and eyes both widening at the sight of him on



his feet and seemingly okay.

He hurries across the room and stops in front of him. (Very close, so close, he has to pin down the urge to *run*.) He reaches in to take his hands, looking the tiniest bit overwhelmed. "I'm so glad you're doing better than before," he says, incredibly sincere. He sounds like he cares.

(If he cared he would have stayed and helped Techno.)

"Yeah," Tommy says emptily. The warm feeling recedes, replaced by resentment. He doesn't pull his hands away, though. "I've been feeling better for the last week or so." Okay, that's kind of a lie, and kind of underhanded to mention, but he feels justified in being a little bit petty.

If the words shock or annoy him, he doesn't show it, holding one hand a bit tighter and raising the other to gesture at his wing. "Is that feeling any better? It looked awful last time I was here."

He shrugs. "Not really. It's... it doesn't really hurt unless I try to stretch it out," the restricted wing twitches, and he suppresses a flinch. He doesn't get to be hurt about this, anymore; it was his fault, and he's suffering for it.

"Unfortunately, you probably *should* be trying to stretch it out," Phil frowns. His own wings rustle against his back. (Tommy was always jealous of his wings, so large and dark, shining silver in the sun. They're so strong and striking. He's always liked his own wings, but...) "I'll take a look at it after dinner, if you want me to."

He fiddles with the too-big sleeve of his shirt. "Yeah, sure. Probably a good idea. Techno's scared to even touch my wings, so it's just kinda been left alone for a while."

"I'm not scared," Techno calls. "For the record."

Phil chuckles, and Tommy manages to crack a smile.

They all sit down for dinner together. It feels like a morbid mirror of how they'd all eat dinner together when he was younger; god, they even unconsciously sit in the same order as they used to. It feels... wrong and right at the same time.

Tommy pokes at his food quietly, mostly pretending to eat when his family looks at him. Techno is very quiet as well, eating his dinner almost silently, only offering words when addressed.

Phil and Ghostbur keep conversation going, filling the two of them in about things currently going on L'manberg. Tommy blocks most of it out; it just makes him sad to hear about all his former friends doing their own thing and having their own happy lives without him.

"I would have come back sooner, but they're getting... weird about letting people come and go," Phil explains. He sounds a little exhausted. "They're asking a lot of questions. Quackity, especially; he saw me leaving today and asked so many questions about where I was going... He was very interested."

"I think Quackity is interested in dyin'," Techno mutters, sticking a piece of meat in his mouth and chewing almost aggressively. "None of his business, what you're doin'."

Tommy sinks down in his chair, feeling small. He doesn't know why it makes him upset. (He does know. Quackity is (was?) his friend, and while he knows, logically, that Techno is violent, the idea of him hurting one of his friends makes him upset.

(Dabbing Tubbo's burns with cloths wet by healing potion. Tired, mismatched eyes staring up at

him.

“ *You said he wouldn’t hurt me .*”)

Suddenly, he can’t eat. He feels shaky and he realizes he might be wheezing again, because his chest hurts.

(“ *You said you wouldn’t hurt me ,*” Dream’s voice is soft with hurt, touching where Tommy had scratched his arm.)

That’s not-- no. That’s not related. He’s not like Techno. They’re different, they’re not the same-- he wouldn’t hurt his friends.

His fingers fiddle with the sleeve of his shirt. It’s the one he wore the day Dream visited, and it has a faint discolored spot where he cut his arm. He has to resist the urge to scratch at himself again.

They’re all still talking. Even Techno, now, is able to talk, melting into conversation with people he trusts.

(Tommy isn’t sure if he trusts them anymore. They left him alone, they never came and helped him, or even offered him company. Ghostbur *barely* counts; his company was more depressing than anything else.)

(The sounds of their voices are beginning to give him a headache.)

(He’s tired again.)

He gets up from his chair. He’s shaking.

“Are you alright, mate?” Phil asks, brow furrowing as he watches him stand.

He raises a hand to tug anxiously at his bangs, like Techno does. He doesn’t nod, doesn’t even really acknowledge the words.

He turns and walks, shaking, to the bathroom. It’s the only room he feels safe escaping to; the loft (which he’s only recently been informed of) is Techno’s private space, and the basement is terrifying by association.

He closes the door and locks it, sinking down to the floor, wrapping his arms around his knees. He unconsciously presses his hand against the cut on his shin, only to find the scar under his pants. He wants to dig his fingers into the old, bloody version of the slash and rip himself apart.

Why can’t he just have a fucking meal with his family? Why does his horrible, fucked up brain decide to ruin everything for him? He was almost feeling *happy* for a few minutes.

And now he isn’t. He feels panicky and trapped and he just wishes he wasn’t here.

“They didn’t even do anything to you,” he whispers to himself, pulling his own hair and undoing the braid that Techno so carefully put it in. “Not now. They just-- they were just talking. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

They have done things to him, though. Wilbur lost his mind, he hurt him more than once in more than one way. Techno hurt his friends, he hurt *him* .

Phil left them when they needed him. He played favorites. Maybe they could have stayed a normal family, had that not happened.

Tommy curls further into himself, burying his face in his knees.

-

The bathroom door slams closed, and Techno drops his head into his hand, groaning. "Fuck."

"What's wrong?" Ghostbur asks, obviously confused and alarmed. "You look upset."

"He's not gettin' any better," he mumbles, pushing his fingers into his hair and resisting the urge to pull it. "I'm not helpin' him, he's not gettin' better."

"He's definitely getting better," Phil promises, resting his hand on his back. "I can tell. He's obviously been through a lot, Techno, you can't expect everything to get better this quickly." He pauses, brows furrowing. "Has he told you what happened?"

He digs his claws into his scalp, just enough to hurt but not enough to make him actually bleed. "No," he mutters. "I've got some guesses, but he hasn't told me much. He doesn't talk about whatever happened. He just... cries about it and then ignores it."

"Poor Tommy," the ghost murmurs. "He seems really sad..."

Techno sinks down against the table, pressing his face against his arm. He has *so* many guesses.

Tommy flinches at every touch, even at the gentlest things. Techno tries to touch him as little as possible, but even brushing against him makes him cringe away and go tense.

(He hates how much he understands; wasn't he like that, so long ago? He remembers flinching at touch for at least the first year he lived with Phil, and then occasionally as he got older. It's actually only been in the last few years that he tamped down his startle response.)

Tommy doesn't eat enough. Even when offered food, he seems to hesitate in eating it.

(He understands that, too.)

Tommy has nightmares that wake him in a panic, he's covered in wounds and scars that imply a hell of a lot more than his voice could ever say, and he looks terrified whenever Techno raises his voice. He stays generally quiet, says he feels like he has to be useful, and apologizes for everything.

He tries to help, but he can't pry, because the few times he's tried, Tommy just-- shuts down. He curls into himself and stares into space and often starts crying.

(He understands that, more than he'd ever verbally admit.)

He talks in his sleep, and the few times Techno has listened in, he's heard him mumbling for someone to get away from him, apologizing, and saying Dream's name.

Something happened with Dream. Dream did something to him, though he isn't sure what. It's something *bad*, though.

(He thinks about the ruins. A knife cutting into his wrist, through his hair.

Dream is a sadistic bastard, so he wouldn't put it past him to hurt Tommy.)

*Kill Dream*

*Get rid of him*

*Snap his neck break his mask*

*Blood for the blood god*

“I’m not helpin’ him,” Techno mumbles, sinking further against his own arm.

“You’re doing your best,” Phil says gently, rubbing his back. “He just needs time. I’m sure things will get better once he’s not sick or hurt anymore...”

He digs his claws in against his head again. The sharp pricks of pain feels good against his rising panic. It’s probably because Tommy is out of sight, he’s been constantly watching him for two weeks after all. And because the voices are calling for blood, louder than their usual.

He can’t keep burning himself out like this. He’s almost as worn-out as Tommy is, and he’s *not* a hypothermic teenager covered in awful wounds, who’s obviously been mistreated. He hasn’t gotten good sleep this whole time, and especially not after Dream visited. He feels unsafe in his own home, constantly walking on eggshells.

(“Are you, really?” Dream asks, purposefully quiet. He can feel his smile and his eyes through the porcelain of his mask. “You’ve completely changed your ways? You’re not doing anything like before?” One hand drops from where it’s tucked into his pocket to run along the sheath of the knife at his side, fingering the handle with almost obscene tenderness.

“Is it really that unbelievable?” Techno replies, hesitating to speak any louder than him. His hands are in fists below his cloak.

He can’t believe he let Dream come down here; Tommy is feet from them, losing his mind from anxiety. He knows, he can smell the faint scent of blood and he can almost hear his panicked breathing.

He’s so close. Close enough to touch, to see the chips on his mask, to smell the scent of smoke and metal that clings to his green clothing.

“Knowing you? Yeah, it’s really unbelievable.” Somehow both casual and aggressive, Dream’s hand darts forward, and seizes his arm. His fingers shove up his sleeve, the buttons coming undone, until he can see the scars on his arm.

His thumb presses in purposefully, over the scar from the altar. His face goes numb and he inhales, so sharp it hurts.

“Remember the temple, Techno? That’s why I can’t believe you.” His thumb strokes the thin, raised scar and the bone of his wrist, almost intimate, *gentle*. His other hand still rests on his knife.

He wants to scream, but he only just chokes back a sob.

That night, after Tommy falls asleep, he sits on the floor next to the fire and considers burning away the scar.)

“Phil?” He asks, voice coming out a little rough. “I need your help.”

The hand rubbing his back pauses. "Oh," he murmurs. "I guessed you would, but... I didn't expect you would *ask*."

His ears burn. "I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was entirely necessary."

"I know," he begins rubbing his back again, trying to soothe him. "Do you want me to stay?"

He sinks further against the table. "...yes."

Shame burns at the back of his throat like bile. He should be able to do this. He's fucking *Technoblade*. He's slain armies, destroyed countries, ruled a goddamn empire, and ruined lives, but he can't figure out what happened to his sick little brother and help him get better.

Phil raises his hand from his back and gently pulls him into a sitting position, pulling his hand from his hair. His claws are wet with a very small amount of blood, and a few drops sink into his hair. It feels sticky.

"I'll stay," he says quietly, taking a napkin from the table to clean the blood from his fingers. "You did as much as you could, Techno. Let me help you."

Techno wants to hide again.

"I don't know what I can do for him," his words are soft. "He won't tell me anything, he just *cries*, and I don't know how to help him. I'm not-- Phil, I'm not good at this!" There's an edge of hysteria, as his voice rises. "I can't help him, because I don't know *how*, and it's drivin' me insane--"

"Techno," he interrupts, holding his hand tightly. The pressure is calming, but it's not enough. "You're doing *fine*. You've kept him alive and he's getting healthier. He's up and walking around and not constantly panicking at the sight of another person. You're helping in the only way you can. I don't expect you to be able to help him with whatever emotional issues he has; that's not what you're good at, and that's *fine*."

"He's right," Ghostbur says, gently. He rests a cool hand on his shoulder, burning cold through his shirt. It's grounding. "I'm sure you're doing well, Techno."

His eyes feel hot. He slumps back in his chair. "It hurts, seeing him like this," he mutters. "I feel... useless."

"I know," Phil squeezes his hand, and when he glances over at him, he has a very curious frown on his face, glancing at the bathroom door with worry in his eyes. "I don't think he would, but... has he said anything about his wing?"

Techno shakes his head. "No. I tried to ask him, but he just... he told me he fell."

The words were such an obvious lie. He's not an expert at body language, but even a child would be able to tell Tommy was lying by the way his eyes widened and he stuttered through the sentence, fingers fiddling with the buttons on his shirt. It was a blatant lie.

"When I took care of it, the first time... that isn't a natural break. It can't be. It's too exact." Phil's voice wavers just slightly. His own wings fold very close to his back, feathers ruffling. "Someone *broke* it."

*Dream!*

*Hurt Tommy really badly*

*He can't fly because of him*

*Kill him*

*Get rid of him*

*Break him right back*

The voices are particularly loud this time, and he presses his hand against his temple in more annoyance than anything else. "Not the time," he mutters very quickly, trying to placate them.

His own anger is rising, though; the idea of Tommy having a broken wing is terrifying enough, but... someone deliberately breaking it? It makes his blood boil. His fingers curl into fists.

"Why would someone do that? That's awful." Ghostbur sounds like his old self for a moment, and it's not at all helpful. His own wings flutter a little and then fold tightly against his back.

The bathroom door opens with a slight creak. Tommy peeks out. His face is flushed and his cheeks are shiny with tears. "I fell," he says, voice trembling but not weak. "No one broke my wing, I fell out of a tree."

He walks back to the table, wiping his face dry on his sleeve. When he sits down, their father gently rests his hand on his back and brings him a little closer. He goes willingly.

(Techno ignores a surge of protectiveness when he flinches.)

"I... I really don't think you're telling the truth, about that," Phil says, carefully putting an arm around Tommy. "I saw how your wing was broken. You don't get that kind of break by falling out of a tree."

He leans halfheartedly into the embrace, slumped and small. "I'm not lying," he mutters. "I fell. I was climbing and I got scared, so I fell." His voice wavers. "No one broke it."

"Was it Dream?" Ghostbur asks, almost innocent.

Tommy's eyes widen. Techno presses his thumbnail against his wrist to keep from making a sound.

"What? No, no, of course it wasn't," Tommy waves his hand vaguely and avoids eye-contact. "He- - no, Dream didn't hurt me, why would you...?"

"I don't know," the ghost shrugs. "I know he's been with you a lot, so... doesn't it make sense?"

He sinks back against his chair, looking small. "Dream had nothing to do with it," he whispers. "Nothing at all." He stumbles back up to his feet, clutching the table. "I'm going back to bed."

"Tommy--" Phil tries, gently grabbing at his wrist to halt him.

Even before he reacts, Techno realizes it's a bad idea.

He flinches away, hard, hands pulling in close to his chest, stepping far away from him. "Don't," his voice is hard, fearful. "I said I'm going to bed."

The three of them stare at him as he stumbles to the bed, hiding himself underneath the blankets.

He practically disappears below them.

Techno gets up to clean the table.

Nobody talks.

## Chapter End Notes

lowkey hate this chapter, please hype me up /j i've been looking at it for too long i am so tired

## to rearrange the stars

### Chapter Notes

(vibrates at an inhuman frequency) ***RANBOO ARRIVES IN THIS ONE***

this chapter kicked my ass! because i had to string a bit of plot together and i am Bad At That! but it is worth it for The Boy and also some fluff! some more family time!!! some silly hours! this isn't quite as depressing as our usual fare <3

i hope you enjoy! it isn't the best, but the boy is here and i am excited!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno steadily sharpens a knife, eyes unfocused, sitting in front of the fireplace.

His head is spinning, a little. And it aches. His thoughts are stuck on one single sentence.

*“Dream had nothing to do with it.”*

Bullshit. Dream had something to do with it, he’s sure. He’s not sure how much, but he had *something* to do with it.

God, poor Tommy.

His fingers slip and he drags his bandaged palm against the whetstone. He winces; his wrist caught the edge, and it hurts. Not that he can really *feel* it over the normal pain. Between constantly tending to Tommy, spending time outside in the middle of the night killing mobs (because it sates the voices, if only for the night) and cooking, they’re killing him.

Everyone else is asleep. Phil took over his new bed in the loft, Tommy is in his own bed, and Ghostbur took the armchair. He doesn’t usually stay, but just as he guessed, it began to storm. So they’re all together.

(Again.)

As he sleeps (do ghosts sleep?) he notices that despite being dead, he breathes.

He goes back to sharpening the blade. He doesn’t use knives often-- he has to get too close to use them in a fight, and they’re not practical most of the time. But he likes how they look.

(This one was from Wilbur, actually. It was a birthday present.)

The scraping sound is soothing.

He fumbles with the knife again, his last two fingers feeling numb and useless, and it cuts the side of his finger. He curses under his breath as blood wells up, sinking into the bandages. It’s a minor sting, but it’s enough to make his eyes burn. He’s falling apart.

“Are you okay?” A soft voice asks.



He flinches and sets the knife down. "I'm fine," he lies, not looking back at Ghostbur. "Go back to sleep."

"No, I'm awake now." Ghostbur yawns and comes over to sit next to him, crossing his legs and sitting on the floor. "What're you doing?"

Techno fiddles with the blade, not wanting to let himself be idle. "Sharpenin' a knife." *Trying to stay awake. Trying to calm down. Considering killing Dream .*

The voices have been begging for him to do just that ever since he visited. They don't seem to understand he's trying not to commit violent atrocities anymore.

*Blood for the blood god, they whisper softly. Honor your commitment.*

Some kind of commitment. It's a pact written in his own blood, and barely even willingly.

"You look sad," the ghost of his older brother says gently, shuffling in closer. He tries not to flinch. "Do you want some blue?"

He gives a breathless laugh. "No. Thank you, though."

He nods, frowning deeply. "What's wrong?"

He tries to pick up the knife to continue sharpening it, but his hands are both numb in several places and he can't grip it. His left is numb from the third finger down to his elbow. Fuck, he hates it when they get like this. "Nothin'. Just... thinkin' about things."

"Tommy?" Ghostbur guesses, watching him attempt to lift the knife. He isn't sure if this expression is actually pitying, or if he's just projecting old memories onto him.

"Yeah. Mostly him." He gives up on the knife and instead decides to comb his fingers through his hair. The strands feel strange against his numb skin. "...do you know what happened to him?" Its a long shot, but Ghostbur has to know *something* , even if by accident... right?

"I'm not sure," he shrugs. "I know he was alone, but he seemed okay. Sad, but Tommy always seems a little sad." He fiddles with his collar. "One day, I visited, and he seemed fine. I came back early the next day, and-- he was just sitting on the beach, crying, and he had blood all over his face... he wouldn't tell me what happened, but he was all wet, too. He couldn't talk, he just... coughed. I wrote it down, 'cause it worried me."

Techno swallows a wave of emotion, at the idea of Tommy crying and bloodied. Putting the details together, it sounds like he had almost drowned; he's nearly done the same before.

God, he's going to lose his mind at this rate.

At those words, the voices begin to beg louder. Screaming that it was no *accident*, that he hadn't merely gotten in over his head.

"Who else visited him?" He asks, carefully.

The firelight dances and flashes off the side of his glasses, over Ghostbur's semi-transparent figure.

"I'm not sure... it was mostly me and Dream." He frowns. "I don't think I like Dream very much. Was he friends with Alivebur?"

“No,” he says, a bit shortly. “Dream doesn’t really... like any of us.” An understatement.

“Ah,” he nods in agreement, light flickering through his body. “I didn’t think so. I wonder why he spent so much time with Tommy, then...”

They sit quietly next to the fire, for a minute. Techno attempts, clumsily, to braid his hair, but his hands just don't have enough dexterity. Great...

Ghostbur gently taps his arm. It still makes him flinch, mostly because he’s so cold. “Can I try to braid your hair?” he asks, voice bordering on innocent. “I remember doing it before, and I want to know if I’m able to now.”

He swallows.

(When they were younger, Phil wore his hair long, just to his shoulders. He had taught both of them how to braid because of that. Well, he planned to only teach Techno, who even at the time had shoulder-length hair, but Wilbur couldn’t be left out back then. So they both learned.

And as they got older, Wilbur helped him with his hair often. Especially on early mornings, when he had no energy to fix his hair before going out for the day. He would braid his hair while he sat at the kitchen table, the house quiet.

He was one of very few people who got that honor.)

“Yeah, go ahead.” Techno withdraws his mostly-limp hand from his hair and brushes it to his back, turning slightly so the ghost can reach it.

He makes a small, happy sound, very cognizant of Tommy sleeping behind them, and he reaches in to gently take his hair into his hands. “Oh, your hair is really soft.” His voice is hushed as he runs his fingers through it, combing through small knots.

He closes his eyes against the feeling, trying not to shudder. It isn’t... bad, not at all, but he still hasn’t gotten used to Ghostbur touching him.

(He doesn’t think he ever will.)

He separates the strands of his hair, his motions just as practiced as they were forever ago, and begins braiding it, humming softly under his breath. The tune is vaguely familiar.

It feels surreal. When he’s only humming, his voice isn’t different at all; it’s like the old Wilbur is behind him, braiding his hair before going out for the day, to hunt or explore or build something.

His hands begin to shake, and his eyes get hot. It makes sense; Wilbur’s the only one who’s ever made him feel this vulnerable.

“Did I... when we were younger, did I ever put flowers into your braids?” Ghostbur asks, softly. “I can remember it, I think.”

Techno swallows a wave of emotion. “Yeah...” his voice cracks, and he covers his mouth to resist crying. “Yeah, you did. We... we had this big bush of flowers, on the porch, and you would take the best ones and put them in my hair.”

“I remember that house,” he says, finishing the braid. He doesn’t have anything to tie it off with, so he just lets it rest against his back. “We shared a room, didn’t we?”

He nods. "For a long time, yeah. Neither of us could really sleep alone, so we figured it was better to share..."

He rubs his shoulder idly, with his thumb. He wants to bite into his hand to keep from crying, but he's stopped by the bandages.

They don't speak for a while after that.

Techno falls asleep in the armchair just after dawn. Ghostbur sits next to him.

—

Three days pass without incident.

Phil stays, which is weird, but it's nice to have someone to talk to that isn't Techno; even with as many problems as they have between them, Tommy's happy for more company. They don't speak more about his exile, or any dangerous topic like that. Conversation is kept mostly light, and he's grateful.

The three of them... kind of fall into a hesitant routine. Tommy still does his chores, uninterrupted, but Phil, without saying much about it, takes over a few of the things Techno usually does around the house. It's probably a good thing, considering how stressed he's seemed, but... it feels weird, how little they need to talk about things.

How naturally Phil seems to understand how Techno *works*, how they just seem to *get* each other.

He's not jealous.

(He's just... a little upset that they don't have that, anymore. Because there was a time that Phil just *got* him, too.)

Today, though, they're alone again. Phil had gone out, apparently having thought of something he needed to get before the weather inevitably turned on them. He hadn't said much about what, but he had given them both hugs before he left.

(He's not going to admit how happy that made him.)

"What are you doing?" Tommy asks, sitting up from the edge of his bed and peering curiously at Techno, who's busily digging in a chest. The speed and relative franticness of the action make him worry, and he carefully edges closer to the end of the bed, in case he needs to hide. "Did you hear something again?" He isn't sure he could do that again.

"No," he replies, pulling clothes from the chest with mild triumph on his face. "Do you want to go outside today?"

His eyes grow wide, and he holds his arms out to take the clothes. "Yes, I do!" He starts grinning, even if it kind of hurts his face (that cut on his cheek is... less healed than he thought; he slept on that side and now it's super sore) and does halfhearted grabby hands. They land in his arms, gently tossed, and he hugs the bundle from pure joy.

"Alright, then go get dressed. Ever since you got here, I've kinda been ignorin' things I need to do." He stands, brushing off his already-dressed self. "I figured today was the day I get back into things."

Tommy winces a little. It feels... very bad, to know that his older brother has been ignoring his

own work for him. To know just how much he's disrupted his life, by showing up here.

He's suddenly tempted to run away as soon as they're outside, so Techno can go back to his peaceful life.

"As long as you're warm and we don't stay out too long, I figure it'll be fine," he's still talking, unnoticing of Tommy's internal self-hatred. "You've been goin' out a bit anyway, so I'm sure you can handle a little more time out there. I know you're bored, inside all the time..."

Despite his fear and self-doubt (*why would he do this to Techno? Why would he mess everything up for him?*) he's very excited. He doesn't even know what's around here, just that it's snowy and cold. He's excited to see what's been built out here.

He takes the clothes and closets himself in the bathroom. He avoids the mirror as he changes; the sight of his own body is not something that he wants to ruin the day with.

None of Techno's clothes fit him, because unlike him, Techno actually has muscles. He's not as bulky as people seem to assume, but he's a thousand percent more built than him. (Is he jealous? Maybe a tiny bit.)

He buttons up the shirt partway to keep it in place, slipping his wings carefully through the slits in the back. Techno hadn't been happy about him having to do that before, but he seemed to understand the necessity.

("I need to get more shirts," he muttered, which just made him laugh.)

He actually managed to clean his wings up a bit more, late last night. No one was awake, and the only light came from the waning fire and the moon, but he managed to get some of the worst feathers out and made them look the tiniest bit more presentable. He doesn't have the energy to spend on actually cleaning them up, but... maybe sometime soon.

He doesn't know why he cares. It's not like he'll be flying anytime soon; Phil told him as much when he reluctantly let his father inspect the break again.

("If it heals properly..." Phil trailed off, carefully running his fingers over the crooked bone. "Maybe you'll be able to fly again. But I'm not sure." He let out a low sigh.

Tommy isn't proud of crying as much as he did. At least he hadn't pushed about how it *happened*.)

He winces at the thought. It's enough to bring tears to his eyes again.

*Focus*, he tells himself, wiping his eyes on his hands. God, he's been crying so much lately. Gross.

He buttons up his shirt the rest of the way and adjusts his pants so they mostly fit (Techno apparently has much bigger hips than him?) before giving himself a wary once-over in the mirror. He looks... fine. The clothes don't fit, obviously, and the sight of the bandages still littering his body make him frown, but he looks presentable.

He runs a hand through his hair and forces a smile at himself.

When he wanders back out into the living area, Techno is sitting at the table, lacing up his boots. They're the tall, black ones, the ones he hasn't seen in a while. They're kind of fancy, coming up to his knees, with shiny, ribbon-y laces and all these swirly golden details. They look sturdy and intimidating.

*(He wore those boots at the festival.)*

Tommy shakes his head to dismiss the thought. “So, what shoes am I going to wear? Because I... don’t have any.”

“I found a pair of mine that might fit,” he gestures without looking to a pair of old-looking but still serviceable leather boots. “I’ll get you another pair sometime.”

He sits down in one of the other chairs, pulling on the boots and inspecting them carefully. “They fit fine.” They’re a little big, but he’s more than grateful enough not to complain. “So what’re we doing today, exactly?”

“I just have a few things to check on,” Techno says, sweeping his hair to his back to pull it into a secure ponytail. His hands are wrapped tightly in bandages, he notices, from his wrists to between his fingers. His brows furrow; did he get hurt, somehow? “It won’t be long.”

He nods, and then they’re off, after he’s offered a warm coat to wear. The snow is thick on the ground, crunching under his boots, and everything sparkles with frost. The air is crisp with the scent of spruce trees and the sharpness of cold.

Tommy’s never liked the cold, he’s always been much happier in the summertime, but he thinks he might understand why Techno, who always runs so hot, has always loved the winter. Even now, after clearly living here for a while, he smiles at the cool wind on his face and tilts his head back slightly as he walks, enjoying the feeling.

He realizes he hasn’t seen him smile like this in a long time.

“So,” he glances around the land outside the house, catching sight of few structures. “What first?”

Quiet as ever, Techno shows him around. He doesn’t ask him to do anything, maybe thinking it’ll be too much, but he’s fine with that. Just being *outside* is so much better than being inside.

They check on the bee farm (and if Tommy pauses and stares at the insects for longer than he should, Techno doesn’t point it out) and the turtles and the modest (read: too much for any sane person) farm he has. It’s nice, seeing what he’s been doing out here. What he’d be doing if he wasn’t there.

It hurts, a tiny bit, to see that he’s interrupting his life, but it’s equally nice.

“Are you feelin’ okay?” Techno asks, as they’re walking away from the farm. He’s fiddling with the small, golden chains on the front of his cloak, making them click together. “Because I want to keep walkin’ around for a bit, but if you feel like you need to go back inside...”

“No, I’m good,” Tommy assures, grinning. “I feel great, actually.” His ankle is a little sore, and he feels like he has to breathe especially deeply in this cold, but it’s still good. He feels good. Just being in the sunlight, pale as it is, feels nice.

So they walk, for a bit. They don’t talk; they just walk over the snowy ground, listening to the crunch of snow and the sounds of birds and other harmless creatures.

*(Tommy sees them fly, and feels real envy.)*

He’s reminded loosely of when they would go hunting, when he was younger. Phil and Wilbur never approved— they thought it was too dangerous, letting a teenager take his little brother out hunting— but Techno had always found a way around them.

Back then, he hated the silence. He'd ramble the whole trip, even though he knew he was scaring away game. He hated how quiet Techno was, as they stalked prey. He hated it.

Now, though, he thinks he might love it. It's soothing. It feels like something healing.

They make a wide loop around the area, always keeping the house in sight. Tommy tries to familiarize himself with the terrain, wanting to make sure he could get back if he needed to; he's not great with directions.

On their way back to the house, he decides to start talking again. "Do you really like it out here?" He asks, tucking his hands into his pockets.

He nods, kicking a snowy stone out of the way. "Yeah," his voice is soft, almost a little distant. "It's... really quiet. Feel like I can actually think out here." He has that soft smile again, his head tilted to the side as he listens to the birds.

"It is really quiet," he agrees, walking a bit closer to him so he can gently knock their shoulders together. "I think I could live out here. Like, if this... hadn't happened, I probably would've still liked it here, y'know?"

He worries for a half-second that Techno is going to ask him what, exactly, happened, but he just smiles some more, left ear twitching and his earrings clicking together. "I'm just glad you're not in a good enough mood to throw snowballs at me."

In retaliation, and in a stupid move considering his bare hands, Tommy leans down, gathers a handful of snow, and throws it directly at Techno's head.

He doesn't even have a second to dodge, and the lump of snow shatters against his head. The flakes immediately begin to melt into his hair, dripping down his cheek.

"Y'know what? I brought that one on myself. You get away with it, this time." He's grinning, and he wipes the water from his cheek with his sleeve. "Next time, I'm goin' to shove your dumb face into the snow."

He grins right back. "Looking forward to it, bitch," he laughs, sticking his hands back into his pockets to warm them.

They're getting closer to the house, now, approaching from the back. This is one of the first time since he got there that their conversation hasn't felt weird, layered with discomfort and anxiety. It just feels... normal. Like nothing much has changed.

He likes that feeling. He's felt it a couple times recently, but it's strongest right now. He's... not happy, not yet, there's too much lingering in his mind for him to be happy. He still hurts, and even this light amount of physical activity makes it hard to breathe. But he's... content, maybe. He feels safe, because he's fairly sure Techno wouldn't let anyone hurt him here. It'd just be embarrassing.

They round the corner of the house, and all feelings of contentment leave him at the sight of a tall, imposing figure near the porch.

---

Techno's getting really bad about getting complacent. It happened before Tommy showed up, when the voices were quiet and he could spend all day doing nothing if he wanted to and he was alone but not lonely.

And it was starting to happen again, despite how he and Tommy are both unravelling. He's managing to keep the only two members of his family he still has alive close, and that's better than anything he could hope for.

Hell, he fell asleep with Phil stroking his hair last night, like he did when he was little and scared of everything. He actually slept at night, not in the early morning, and woke up in a decent mood. Things... aren't looking up yet, but he didn't feel as much like garbage as usual.

He got some of his work out of the way, all while keeping an eye on Tommy and letting him get some fresh air. It's a little amazing, how much he lights up in the sun, how excited he seems to be, outside. It makes a tiny part of him proud, that soft older brother part of him that he tried to lock away years ago.

And then there's a stranger outside his house, and any illusion of contentment is shattered.

Techno doesn't think before he crowds Tommy behind him, quietly whispering to stay back. He doesn't think before drawing his sword and slashing at the figure, either. He doesn't recognize them, not in the shade of the house, but it doesn't matter; no one who shows up like that could be *good*.

The stranger lets out an inhuman, oddly familiar kind of scream, and stumbles away before his sword can make contact. They pass into the sunlight, and he takes in their appearance, trying to place them.

Black and white hair, topped by a gleaming crown. Equally unmatched skin. Small, purple-and-green particles floating around their form-- an Enderman of some kind, then? A... very proper-looking suit. A pair of white-gloved hands over their face as they try to hunch down in fear--

"Wait!" Tommy says, behind him, grabbing his arm. "Don't-- uh, don't attack him."

Techno's brows furrow. "Do you know who he is?"

The stranger peeks a bright-green eye out from behind his fingers. "...Tommy?" He asks, slightly muffled. Techno's a bit surprised by how deep his voice is.

"Ranboo?" Tommy's eyes widen, and he steps in front of his brother with a grin growing on his face.

"Oh, I knew it!" 'Ranboo' says, taking his hands off of his face and straightening up. He's... incredibly tall, tall enough Techno has to look up to see his face. "I knew you were gone!" He grins, showing off a mouthful of sharp teeth.

"What do you mean?" He asks, bouncing on his feet slightly as he looks up at his... friend?

Techno observes Ranboo carefully. He has a diamond sword, hanging off his belt, but he hasn't gone for it, not even when he came in swinging. He's wearing a full suit in the tundra, which is kind of hilarious. He's unarmored, and seems more concerned with avoiding eye contact (understandable) than fighting. He doesn't seem... dangerous, despite his intimidating height and the particles floating around him.

"Dream keeps saying you don't want visitors, and you haven't been answering my letters, so I-- well, I *might* have followed Philza, because I figured he'd know something?" Techno's brows raise and he cuts a sharp glare towards the house, because *why the fuck didn't he notice he was being followed?!* "I dunno, it seemed like a good plan..." Ranboo pulls at the cuffs of his gloves idly as he talks, grinning down at Tommy. "And I was right! You're here!"

Tommy looks absolutely elated, his usually-stiff wings fluttering a bit underneath his oversized coat. "I thought you stopped leaving me letters," he says, shaking his head. "Did you?"

"No way, I kept leaving them for a while," he nods aggressively. "Well, I stopped a bit ago, but Dream said you were sick, so I thought that was why. But you're out here! Why are you out here?"

Techno starts putting some pieces together in his head. Dream apparently has been the one telling everyone how Tommy's been doing, which means he controls the perception of him. While the kids talk, he fiddles with the fur collar of his cloak. He's also either lying about Tommy being sick, or he's been watching him and knows he's sick, just not... where he should be.

It's not really a case of *if* he's been watching, but more a case of *when* he's been watching. Dream seems to know a lot more than he has any right to, sometimes.

That doesn't bode well.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and clears his throat. "Tommy, mind introduc' me to your friend before I kick him off my land?"

Ranboo's mismatched eyes widen and his ears droop. He waves a hesitant hand, leaning down a bit again, as if trying not to seem so goddamn tall.

Tommy continues with his excited, idle bouncing. "Ranboo, this is Technoblade! I'm sure you know who he is, but I've been living with him for a while now," He pauses for a moment, coughing into his arm and making Techno's heart leap just a bit. "Techno, this is Ranboo. He's my friend, and he's nice... so please don't kill him."

He rolls his eyes. "I'm retired, Tommy, c'mon." He gives the kid a wary once-over, and then sighs. "So, you followed Phil all the way here? Did anyone follow *you*?"

He shakes his head. "I don't think so. I would've noticed, I'm pretty sure." He fiddles with his gloves again. "I don't even think *he* noticed. He went inside without looking around or anything."

Techno lets out a long sigh. If Phil was that distracted, he's sure they're going to have to talk about something later, and he's just... not into that idea, personally. He doesn't want to talk about anything that he's likely to bring up. He was vague about what he was going to do today, and it makes him worry about what he did, how distracted he apparently was.

He crosses his arms and leans his head back to stare at the sky. "Alright, we're going inside."

The kids nod, and he leads them inside. He definitely notices when Ranboo has to lean significantly down as to not smack his head on the doorframe. It's what he gets for being a giant.

Phil is sitting in front of the fire, his wings loosely splayed out behind him, eyes closed as he apparently just rests. He looks amazingly content.

"Were you completely unaware that a seven-foot-tall child followed you home," Techno slips his cloak off and hangs it up. "or did you have a reason to let him follow you?"

He opens his eyes and blinks over at the three of them. His eyebrows furrow and he stares at Ranboo for a long moment. "...to be fair," he says lightly, "he's very sneaky for someone that tall."

The kid grins and waves. "I try my best."



Tommy starts laughing, wheezing into the crook of his elbow. Techno rolls his eyes again.

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter's a bit lighter than usual, simply because i am going to hurt everyone some more soon :-)

i'm trying not to push myself into perfectionism anymore, so i'm just posting chapters when they're done. if it's bad, take it up with my editor

(i don't have an editor)

(its just me)

# the past keeps pulling me

## Chapter Notes

pain time

to keep it 100% with y'all, i've had a pretty garbage couple of days, so it kinda came out in this. this is,, a bit more venty and rambling than usual, but it's still. Good Content. i think. and hey, even if it isn't, this motherfucker has THREE perspectives!

this chapter,, is very heavy. it's a turning point, and it unlocks New Angst for the Future!! its also the second longest lmaooo.

title from razors edge by digital daggers! (a song suggested for this fic by deathsquiggles that i have been listening to religiously while writing; it fits so well)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Something clatters and breaks downstairs, and Phil sits up so quickly he knocks himself dizzy for a moment. Instinctively, he turns and observes the room through bleary eyes; everything seems fine in the loft.

Techno's actually still asleep across from him, face hidden by the loose strands of his hair. It's evidence of just how much he's been depriving himself of sleep, the fact that the noise didn't wake him at all. He's just breathing softly as he sleeps, a stuffed pig held against his chest. He looks young, like he's still the same seven-year-old kid he took in all those years ago.

He pats his head gently as he passes and walks quietly to the ladder. Climbing down, he keeps himself alert, perhaps a little more so than usual; he really can't believe he was so... out of it, that day. He could have led *anyone* back home, and he was lucky the only person who noticed him was Ranboo, who he doesn't think could ever be a threat.

Or, well. Maybe he can believe how distracted he was.

Anyone would be distracted after learning they're trapped.

He sighs as he gently steps towards the main room, lit only by the firelight. And in the low light, he can see his youngest son, next to a broken lantern.

He steps forward, hesitant to speak. Tommy's sitting up against the edge of the bed, on the floor, whispering to himself as he clutches his head in his hands. There's blood smeared on his cheek.

"*He's* not here, I'm okay, it's-- it's not *happening* again, I'm safe..." he watches as he curls up into a small ball, knees to his chest and his arms tightly around his legs, uninjured wing wrapping around his side. (And oh, is that family resemblance heartbreaking.)

"They won't let anything happen to me, I'm safe, I'm *safe*-- " he lets out a tiny whimper and begins *sobbing*, hiding his face.

And god, Phil knows he's not a perfect father, he knows he hasn't been there enough, he knows he abandoned his sons when they needed him, but he can at least fix this. He can at least help *now*.

He crosses the room with quiet steps and kneels down next to Tommy, hand hovering above his shoulder, hesitant to touch after seeing him flinch so badly so many times before.

(“He acts like we’re goin’ to *hit* him,” Techno muttered earlier that night, sitting up on the edge of his bed and staring at the ladder as if he expects to have to go down it any second.

“Like you used to,” Phil replied without thinking, and when he glanced over at him, the expression on his face was a scandalized horror. He isn’t sure if he feels bad for saying it.)

“Tommy?” he asks, voice as soft as possible.

He still flinches, sitting up with wide eyes, tears glimmering on his flushed cheeks, feathers ruffling. He chokes on a sob. He isn’t sure what he expects, but the apology isn’t it.

“I’m sorry,” he says, thick with tears. “I-I... I’m sorry.”

He blinks, taken aback. “It’s alright,” he says, glancing at the broken lantern and the blood smeared on his cheek. “Did you break the lantern? That’s fine, we have plenty of those.”

He wipes his face on his arm, visibly trembling. “I... yeah, I broke it. I’m sorry, please don’t be mad...” His head ducks against his knees, avoiding eye contact.

( *“He acts like we’re goin’ to hit him.”* )

(He can see that five-year-old kid with dirty, matted wings and scraped knees, holding a crude wooden sword, fear in his eyes.)

Phil swallows his heartbreak and reaches in to gently rest a hand on top of his head, fingers sinking into his soft hair. “Tommy, I’m not mad. Why are you up so late? Aren’t you tired?”

He hugs his legs and curls up tighter, as if trying to protect himself. “...I had a nightmare,” he admits quietly, still not looking up. “I got scared and-- uh, I knocked the lantern over ‘cause I thought...” he trails off, voice breaking.

“That’s alright,” he says, moving in closer, hesitantly reaching in to wrap an arm around him. “C’mere.”

He expects the promise of comfort to draw him in, because Tommy has always craved affection, and done a lot to get it. Even very soon after they met, when he was still so small and had obviously been through a lot, he was clingy in every way.

But now he flinches back, leaning back on the bed and staring at him with wide, fearful eyes. Like-- like--

Like he expects to be hurt. Just like *all* of them had expected all those years ago.

What broke his trust?

Protective rage fills him at the thought of someone hurting him to this point. Of course, he knew *someone* had done *something*-- the break in his wing, how desperate he seems to be about being useful, how quickly he follows orders... something happened, but he hadn’t seen such obvious signs until now.

“Tommy,” Phil’s voice comes out a little more angry than he intends, “what happened to you?”

He stares at him, tears welling along his eyelashes, hugging himself and looking so, so *small* . He

opens his mouth, maybe to explain, but he just begins to cry again, the sound coming out almost strangled as he struggles to calm himself down.

He brings him into his arms and holds him against his chest, wanting to fix this, wanting to know who did this to his kid so he can *get rid of them* .

(It reminds him of too many past events.

Wilbur coming home crying with a split lip because of a person who convinced him they loved him, Techno covered in blood and staring into space with a drugged horror, Tommy himself disappearing into the woods for a day and coming out wounded and scared out of his mind.)

“You’re okay,” he promises, stroking back his hair. “You’re safe, I promise.”

Tommy doesn’t ease into his embrace like he would in the past— in fact, he presses his hands against his chest and almost seems to consider pushing himself away. And oh, that hurts, because isn’t this what he’s supposed to do? Protect his kids, and when he can’t, fix whatever happens to them?

“Do you want me to let go of you?” Phil asks, the words tasting like ash on his tongue.

And he tries not to cry himself when he nods, squirming out of his embrace and curling up against the bed again. He keeps his hands to himself, despite all his parental instincts screaming to hold his broken son as close as possible, as if that can put him back together.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy says, voice a little high. Panic registers in his eyes, reddened and shiny from crying. “I’m— I’m sorry, I just— I don’t want to be touched, I’m *sorry*...” He buries his face in his folded arms, his breathing ragged.

“It’s okay,” he says, ignoring the waver in his own voice. “You don’t have to apologize. It’s perfectly fine.” He clasps his hands on his lap. “What can I do to help you?”

He’s quiet for a long moment, hugging himself, obviously trying to keep himself calm. He can see his fingertips digging into the exposed flesh of his arm.

(Did he develop that habit completely independently? Or did he get it from Techno?)

“Tomorrow,” he starts, voice muffled, “can you help me clean up my wings?”

He drags his eyes from his nails digging into his arm, to the disheveled feathers of his wings. They stick out in places, while in others they appear almost darkened with neglect and dirt. And that’s just what he can see in the dimness. He can’t imagine how uncomfortable it must be.

“Of course I can,” he nods, feeling a well of emotion inside of him begin to overflow. The fact that Tommy even let them get this bad... it’s evidence that he’s unraveling, no matter how happy he’s seemed in normal conversation.

(He seemed so *happy* while Ranboo was there. It was the first time in-- well, a long time-- that his smile looked genuine; while the enderman hybrid was speaking about something, his pets if he recalls correctly, Tommy’s eyes lit up with excitement and he didn’t seem to be able to stop grinning.)

He’s hiding a lot, and oh god Phil just wishes he felt safe enough to *tell* him. “Is there... anything else?”

He peeks up from his arms. He's struck by how familiar the tired blue eyes staring at him are; they look like his own, in the depths of their exhaustion if not the color. At least it makes sense for *him* to carry that weariness; Tommy is only a child, he shouldn't have to know that kind of tiredness.

(But the world is hardly fair, and he knows this well.)

"Can you stay with me? I want to try and go back to sleep, but... I don't want to be alone." He hides his face again, muttering another apology like punctuation.

He wordlessly nods, watching as he climbs into bed. He sits on the edge of the mattress and hesitates to touch him, but he stays.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles once more, face pressed against the pillow. "I... I didn't mean to..." he yawns, before coughing into his arm. Every time he coughs, his heart lurches painfully. "I didn't mean to freak out. I wish I could tell you why, b-but I..." His expression falls troubled and he curls up under the blankets, as if trying to take up as little space as possible.

"You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to," he tells him softly, touching his hand briefly before remembering himself. "I just want you to be... *happy*, again."

A silence follows, with nothing but the howling of the wind outside and the crackling fire to populate the house.

Tommy sighs deeply and turns on the pillow to look up at him, still so weary. "I haven't been really *happy* in a long time," he admits, sounding a thousand years old. "It's... I'm okay, I promise. I'm just... really tired."

He swallows the sob that wants to leave him at how *resigned* he sounds. Like he's just accepted that he can't be happy. That he isn't allowed to be upset about it.

(Wilbur's cut fingertips from playing guitar without ceasing. Techno with a stab wound. Tommy's perpetually scraped knees.)

"I know I hurt you," Phil murmurs, looking towards the darkened sky through the nearby kitchen window. "I'm... sorry, that I left."

He can feel the weight of his eyes on him, too tired to reproachful. "...I'm not really mad anymore," he sighs. "I mean, I am, but... too much has happened. I would've left us, too."

"It had nothing to do with any of you," he says, and at least that's honest. "I left because I wanted... I wanted *adventure* again. I was impatient..."

"You were selfish," Techno's voice is surprisingly loud in the quiet house, and as he approaches the bed, he can see an absurd, matching exhaustion under his eyes. Their family seems to only be held together by that weariness, now.

He sits down on Tommy's other side and avoids eye-contact. "You alright, Toms?"

He nods, sinking down into the blankets and staring up at Techno. "I had a nightmare."

"About Wil again, or...?" He tilts his head curiously, exhaustion in every movement. He couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour or two.

"No, um... it was something else..." He hides his face in the pillow. Techno's face creases with concern and he rests a hand on his shoulder.

Phil notices how he still flinches, but it isn't nearly as bad as before. (It makes sense. He's always been more trusting of his older brothers.)

"Wanna talk about it?" He asks, pausing to yawn into his hand. "Or is it one of those things you're just gonna freak out about?" It's a lazy joke, a *very* Techno joke, and it makes both of them laugh, short and breathless.

"Yeah, it's probably something I'll just freak out about," he admits, getting comfortable on the pillow. "You can go back to bed. Dad said he'll stay."

He raises his brows and glances over. He looks the tiniest bit betrayed, and it's almost funny. "You sure? You both need sleep, too. And I'm fine."

"You look like you got punched in both eyes," Tommy says flatly. "Go to bed."

Phil nods in agreement, keeping his words to himself and instead fixing Techno with intense eyes that practically scream *take care of yourself or I will make you*.

He frowns and slumps slightly, looking like a scolded child. "...an hour," he mumbles. "I'll lay down for an hour, and then I'm up again. That's all you're gettin'."

"Two hours," Tommy argues sleepily. "Y'can't fight on an hour of sleep, Techno. You told me that before."

His cheeks flush in the dim light and his frown turns into an outright scowl. "You're lucky you're like this, Tommy. Or I'd punch you for that."

"It wouldn't even hurt, 'm too strong," he's drifting off, the tension sinking from his limbs as he falls asleep. "A big man, you could say."

"Uh-huh, very big and strong," Techno acknowledges, voice softening with amusement. "Go back to sleep."

"Y'go back to sleep," he counters, before falling silent.

More howling winds. Ice hits the glass of the windows with a low, almost ringing sound. Tommy's breath rattles softly in his chest, and his exhales are light wheezes. Techno pulls his blankets up a little higher and tucks them around his shoulders, before brushing a hand through his messy bangs.

"Do you really think I'm selfish, Techno?" Phil asks, without looking over.

"I think you *were* selfish," he corrects quietly. "I don't think you're, like, an inherently selfish person or anythin'. The opposite, actually. You... took on a *lot* of responsibility fairly young, takin' us in like you did, and you just wanted to go back to what you knew." He reaches over the bed to touch his arm, clawed fingers cool from the chilled air. "But leavin' like that, leavin' Wil to raise us, with Tommy so young and... uh, *everythin'* about me...? *That* was selfish. It was one of the few things Wil and I agreed on, y'know?"

He runs a hand through his hair, feeling shame bubble in the pit of his stomach. It's all true, because of course it is; Techno's never been one to lie, and he especially wouldn't about this. And it isn't even malicious, his tone is soft and almost *caring*, but firm in it's meaning.

"I regret leaving." He's never said it out loud, and it hangs heavy in the air. "I always wonder... if I hadn't left, would any of this," he gestures widely with his hands, as if encapsulating the entirety of their lives up to this point, "have happened? Would Wilbur be dead, would any of this have

happened to Tommy, would you..." he trails off, dropping his head into his hands. "Would we still be a family?"

"We're still a family," Techno says, absentmindedly petting back his little brother's hair as he sleeps. "We all fucked up, Phil. Maybe not Tommy, but Wil and I... we're not blameless, in what happened." He chuckles. "But we're still family. You're not getting rid of us that easy. It'll take more than what you've done to drive us away."

Phil laughs, but it's more a sigh than anything else. "I wouldn't *want* to get rid of you, anyway."

He gets up from the edge of the bed and stretches, back audibly popping. "Goodnight," he says, voice gentle as he turns back towards the ladder. "Wake me up in an hour?"

"Two hours," he reminds him.

"Yeah, whatever. Two hours, fine."

(He doesn't wake either of them for the rest of the night, and well into the morning.)

--

"If you knock over my bookshelf somehow, I am going to have to kick you out," Techno warns, stirring his coffee with slightly-threatening metal-on-ceramic clicks. "Be careful with your wings."

"I'm being perfectly careful," Tommy says, wincing as he tries to stretch out his injured wing. Even the good one hurts, because he hasn't been taking care of them at all. He feels bad about it now. "Ow, ow, why does that hurt so bad," he mutters to himself, wanting to draw the limb close to his back again but refusing to hurt himself further.

"Because it's broken," Techno reminds him with entirely too much glee, sipping from his coffee. "Why don't you do this outside?"

"It's snowing," he gestures one-handed at the window. The flurry outside looks intimidating. "I'm not going to break the other one by going outside like that. What do you take me for, an idiot?"

He raises his brows, lips quirking into a smile. "Yes."

"Why--" He whines and resists the urge to stomp his foot, both out of a need to seem mature and because he doesn't want to unbalance himself. "Philza! He's being mean to me again!"

"I am not," Techno adds, voice louder yet much more calm. "Lies and slander. I should have you arrested and jailed for life."

"Aren't you against prisons, Technoblade?"

"Yeah. For everyone but you."

"Techno, stop threatening your brother with prison time, we all know he wouldn't survive," Phil says, badly restraining a laugh as he dries off his hands after doing the dishes. "Alright, that's done. Do you still want my help with your wings?"

Tommy nods, carefully drawing his wings close to his back again, wincing only a little. "Yeah, there's a lot of places I can't reach."

*Usually, I have help*, he thinks, remembering the fussy little noise of amusement Tubbo would make when he saw crooked feathers.

("You look like a mess, y'know," he would tease, straightening out the feathers with a gentle, unexpectedly-calloused hand. "There we go.")

Suddenly, his throat feels tight. Goddammit, he needs to stop reminiscing out of nowhere; it does little other than make him upset.)

It feels... a weird kind of familiar, to let Phil sit behind him and preen his wings, after all this time.

He took over doing it himself when he was about ten, just after he left. Wilbur knew how to do it, but he didn't want him to do it, and Techno simply didn't know how to do it, and to be honest, Tommy didn't want to trust them with the task.

So he did it all by himself for years, keeping them clean and neat all on his own, with infrequent help from Tubbo and exactly one instance of Niki helping.

"It's not too bad," his father comments lightly, starting with his broken wing. His motions are practiced as he starts sorting out his disheveled feathers. "I've seen worse on myself, honestly."

Tommy curls his fingers around the hem of his shirt. "Really? Your wings always look so nice." His voice comes out a little too high. He isn't sure why he feels so panicky, why it started the second Phil touched his wings. He's being really gentle, probably because he's working on the damaged one.

"It takes work to make them look this good," he replies with a light laugh. (None of them have talked about last night, though he gets the sense more was said after he fell asleep. It's something about how Techno isn't making eye contact, something about how hard Phil is trying to sound happy.) "They were a mess when I was younger. I didn't pay attention to them at all, until they were bad enough I couldn't fly. It was embarrassing."

He nods along, pretending to listen. A low buzz is building inside his skull, a dull panic filling his heavy limbs. He's suddenly hyperaware of a lot of things.

His ankle, bright with pain. The cut on his cheek. The little scrape on his hand from breaking the lantern. The flick of Techno's tail out of the corner of his eye, as he pours another cup of coffee. The cool breeze that cuts through the wooden walls of the cabin. The crackle of the fire.

Phil's hands gently cleaning his wings, a soft hum coming from him as he works. It's like when he was too little to do it himself, when he'd sit on the couch in their old living room and impatiently bounce in place as his father cleaned him up.

"Sit still, Tommy," he would say gently, holding him around the waist.

In the present, he must be fidgeting or twitching or something, because he pats his shoulder and says the same, still gentle.

(A strong arm wrapping around his middle and squeezing him close. Fingers touching the base of his broken wing, carding through the feathers, a voice speaking.

"Sit *still*, Tommy, jeez.")

Panic fills him so abruptly he can't even make a sound. He just stops moving, stops breathing, goes entirely still and stiff as if inactivity will save him.

Because the hands touching his wings don't belong to Philza, who for all his faults, Tommy trusts with his wings, at the very least.



No, it's Dream, it has to be Dream. Dream who ~~broke his wing with his bare hands and a SNAP~~ scared him and made him fall out of that tree. Dream who threatened to cut his wings off completely if he didn't *behave*.

He draws in a heavy breath and digs his nails into his thighs, through his pants. His hands are shaking.

"Doing alright?" Phil asks gently, out of sight. Behind him. Touching his wings. Tommy feels his whole body twitch and it-- it *hurts*. "Tommy?"

He swallows a thick mouthful of saliva, feeling nauseous and shaky. He's not there anymore, he's *safe*, Dream can't touch him anymore.

"I—I'm okay," he croaks out. He thinks he might be crying. "I'm fine."

"I'm almost done with this one," he says, straightening out the wing as best he can without hurting him. He barely feels it, his mind more focused on not throwing up from anxiety or completely falling apart on the floor, into a thousand razor-sharp shards.

(Once, when he was thirteen or so, he knocked a plate off the counter in their old house, and it shattered all over the floor.

The sound had scared all three of them so badly that they were all quiet, stiff, and still for a whole minute, before Wilbur unfroze and grabbed the broom.

He wonders if Phil and Techno would freeze at the sound of him breaking.)

Careful fingers slide over the break in his wing and he brings a hand up to cover his mouth, so he doesn't scream like he's being murdered.

"Well, it's healing fine," Phil muses. "You'll have to stretch it more, I think. It'll hurt, but it'll help, too. Broken wings can heal if you take care of them."

He nods on autopilot, sinking teeth into the inside of his cheek as to not panic.

*(Don't panic don't panic don't panic. Dream isn't here. You're safe. Phil won't hurt you. He'd never hurt you like that.)*

*(Would he?)*

His breathing is worse than usual, heavy, wet, rattling inhales, strained exhales. He feels like he's suffocating, like he's swallowing water and choking on salt.

(Strong hands tangled in his hair, pulling, shoving his head under the gentle waves. Sand and salt in his eyes, stinging, painful. Screaming with his mouth full of water.)

"Tommy?" That's... fuck, he can't recognize that voice. Phil's behind him, but that voice came from his side. Uh. Who else is there?

Dream?

No, it has to be Techno, this is his house after all. Right? Right.

*(Get it together, TommyInnit. You're better than this.)*

Techno sits in front of him with his brow furrowed deeply, his hands hovering near him but not

quite touching. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He wants to curl up into a ball and hide forever. He wants everything to start over. He wants to lay down and sleep some more, even though it’s barely eleven in the morning. He’s-- god he can’t breathe--

The hands are off his wings. He can tell, even while being consumed by panic, that they’re lighter, much less itchy and uncomfortable. They feel cleaner, just like this.

“Can I touch you?” Techno asks, hands just above his shoulders.

His wings curl close to his body, even the broken one pulling in close to hide his form, like he’s a scared little kid again.

(Isn’t he? Isn’t he just a scared five-year-old at heart, even now? A stupid, *useless* child...)

(God, he’s spiraling.)

“Don’t touch me,” he whispers. “Don’t.”

“Okay,” Techno’s practically whispering, his voice is so quiet. “Anythin’ I can do for you?”

“Uh...” He pulls his legs up to hug them. “Can I have a blanket?”

He hums quietly, and within seconds there’s a blanket draped around him. He makes sure not to even accidentally touch him, which is nice. He pulls the blanket more securely around himself, trying to hide any bare skin. There’s nothing to hurt if he’s all hidden, right?

He feels twitchy and overwhelmed. The panic is still clawing at his insides, and he can’t breathe properly. His lungs feel like they’re still full of stinging saltwater.

(Dream was trying to *drown* him like that, he realizes now. In the moment he had been so confused that he could do nothing but cry and scream, but looking back-- looking *back--*)

Time passes like that, for a little while. With the three of them sitting together, completely quiet save for Tommy’s labored breathing. No one moves for a while.

He finally forces his body to realize he’s not in any danger, measuring his breaths to be slower and more even, though he still feels like he’s choking-- drowning-- and he’s still trembling. Not as bad as before, but still-- there.

“Y’know, we need to talk about whatever that was.” Techno says, blunt as ever. “What happened?”

*Where do I begin?* he thinks bitterly.

Phil clears his throat. Tommy hasn’t looked back at him, but he thinks he might be crying, which feels wrong to think about. “Did I... did I make you panic like that, Tommy?” It’s not accusatory or pitying, just an honest question.

He hugs his knees, trying to press his drowning lungs back into their normal state. “...kind of,” he murmurs. He swallows thickly again. “When you told me to ‘*sit still*’,” the words taste bitter and disgusting, and it makes him bad because it’s such an innocuous phrase, “it-- uh, reminded me of something. Something *bad*.”

“Do you want to tell us what it was?” Phil presses, voice controlled. But Tommy’s gotten good

with tones, and he can almost feel his repressed anger.

He shuffles closer to Techno.

*Can* he tell them? Can he trust them?

He can trust them, right? They've all been apart for a while, but they're still family. Techno's still the same big brother he's always been, and Phil is still his father, for better or worse. They won't-- they won't blame him for this, not like *he* does, right? Not like-- not like *Dream* did, either.

*Manipulative victim-blaming son of a bitch*, a venomous and not-insignificant part of his brain screams. It hurts a little.

"I didn't break my wing falling out of a tree," he starts meekly. "I, uhm. I tried to run away, from where I was exiled. Dream... Dream came around, sometimes, to keep me company. And he was mad about something, and I got kind of... scared of him, s-so I tried to fly away."

He stares at the wooden floor with a blank gaze, not wanting to see their expressions. His every word feels charged, like the air is crackling with electricity.

"I didn't go far. I... I realized I didn't want to leave, 'cause Dream's really the only friend I've got left," his own voice trails off. "So I came back, and we were walking and talking, and then he-- he--"

The words get stuck and he has to force himself to take deep breaths so he doesn't go off the deep end. "Uh. He-- he grabbed my wing, and he... um, he..." His hands are suddenly in his hair, curled in the blonde strands. It's due for a wash; it's somewhat greasy. "He *broke* it."

Silence reigns for a solid five seconds, before Phil actually growls, the sound low and almost animalistic, and gets up from the floor. His own wings are slightly extended from his back, all glossy grey and white and silver, his posture defensive, feathers on end.

"Where are you goin'?" Techno asks, still sitting in front of Tommy. He sees him lean back, only seeing him from legs to chin.

Something makes a whispering sound as it's drawn. A sword? "He *broke* your wing, Tommy? How?"

He blinks a few times. "With his hands..." God, that detail has haunted him ever since it happened; Dream used his *hands* to snap his bones. So much more personal than using some kind of tool, so much more morbidly *intimate*.

"I'm going to *kill him*," Phil's voice has taken on a steely edge that Tommy's rarely heard before. It chills him to his bones. "Repeatedly, if I can get away with it."

"Too windy out there, to do anything now," Techno warns, his attention mostly on Tommy. He finally glances up and sees the intense sadness and rage in his older brother's eyes, the kind of sadness that leaves him looking worn-out and the kind of rage that would usually lead to him being completely on board with Phil's murder plot.

But instead of getting up and assisting in the carnage, he hesitantly holds out an arm. "You don't have to hug me, but... if you want it, I want to give you one." His smile is weak and sad, crooked.

Tommy shuffles a little closer, wrapping his arms around his middle and resting his head on his shoulder. "I... it was my *fault*," he says, voice small. "He-- he told me not to fly, and I did exactly

the opposite. I tried to run away f-from him, even though I was doing pretty good before that. He... he did what he had to, to keep me *safe* ." That's what he said, anyway, for those few days before he ran away for good.

(God, if Dream finds him here, he's going to have to kiss his wings goodbye altogether. Because he doesn't doubt the masked man will take his axe to them, family be damned.)

More silence, as suffocating as the pain from his wing was, as suffocating as drowning.

"Tommy..." Techno starts, hugging him closer, protectively resting a hand on the back of his head. "There's not a *single* way that could be your fault."

He sinks further against him, trying to hide in the sweater he wears. It's soft, a light blue color, and big even on him. He fixes his eyes on the knit of it. "He told me what would happen if I tried to fly," he whispers. "He said I'd just be in trouble... but I broke the rules a-anyway, so-- so it's my fault..." he trails off, holding handfuls of Techno's sweater in loose fists. He's shaking, again. Maybe he never stopped.

"Not letting you fly was fucking *inhumane* of him," Phil says, obviously seething. He isn't sure of the last time he saw him this angry, this *protective* over someone who isn't Techno. (Against himself, he feels proud.) "Dangerous on *every* level. Your physical health, your mental health-- everything. If he wanted you to be safe and happy, he would've let you fly." Tommy watches as he tightens his grip around the netherite sword's handle, as if desperately wanting to sink it into someone. "It wasn't your fault. I would have tried to run away, too."

That breaks him, and the tears begin anew. He lets out one, hiccupped sob, before burying his face in Techno's shoulder to muffle himself.

It's like when his wing was broken all over again-- hysteria builds in him until he's wailing, clinging desperately to a larger, more solid body, wanting comfort and safety.

And unlike Dream, who's comfort made his skin crawl and who's safety was a trick, Techno gives him something real.

He pulls him in closer, until he's curled up, long limbs and all, on his lap. He strokes his fingers through his hair and shushes him quietly, pressing kisses to his temple.

He wonders why he isn't talking, until he feels his tears dripping down onto him as he holds him. It's much more subtle than his own breakdown, but he's crying too, broad shoulders trembling as he holds him.

And within seconds, Phil is with them, arms wrapping around them both, large wings draping around them like blankets, keeping them both safe from the world. Like he had done years before, with one more person involved...

He doesn't even care that crying like this hurts, or that curling up on Techno's lap like this is uncomfortable because he's so tall, or that he can't seem to breathe.

Somehow, in a paradoxical, wonderful way, he feels safe.

-

The voices started screaming when Tommy began to panic, and they only get worse as he tells them what happened.

They're usually a bit more coherent-- with actual demands and somewhat clever wording, on occasion-- but now, they're demanding in very simple terms.

*Kill Dream, kill Dream, kill Dream*

*Protect Tommy, protect Tommy, protect Tommy*

Techno is very sure it disappoints them when he starts crying himself, holding his little brother in his arms, his own mind replaying his confession over and over and over again.

*"I didn't break my wing falling out of tree... I tried to run away... Dream came around... I got kind of... scared of him, so I tried to fly away...*

*Dream's really the only friend I've got left... he grabbed my wing... he broke it... with his hands...*

*I... it was my fault... he told me not to fly... He did what he had to, to keep me safe...*

He told me what would happen if I tried to fly... I broke the rules a-anyway, so it's my fault..."

Fuck his vow of nonviolence, his retirement, the way he was softening, all of it. He's going to find Dream and break every bone in his body, slowly, *methodically*, so he can feel what he did to Tommy roughly two hundred times over. And then he'll kill him, as many times as it takes for it to *stick*.

For now, though, he holds his little brother in his arms, shushing his wails of pain/panic, and lets himself cry some too.

God, he can't *imagine* what else Dream did to him, if this is the worst. Were all his wounds from him? Did he make sure he didn't have enough to eat, so he would be weak? Did he punish him for simple things like not complying to orders fast enough? How much did he hurt him, control him, *break* him?

### ***KILL DREAM.***

*I will*, he promises internally, not caring if it curses him further to acquiesce to the demands. *His blood will be all yours. As many times as it takes.*

When Phil brings them both into his arms, his wings, he crumbles a little further. The only reason he hasn't entirely broken down is because it's Tommy's turn, what he's feeling is so much *worse*.

Even if this-- *all* of this, but especially Tommy's sharp wails of despair-- is digging a hole into his soul, slowly making him weaker than he's ever been. Fuck, he wishes he could have saved him from this. He wishes he had been a better brother throughout their entire life, not just this portion of it. Not just this godforsaken server, but their whole lives, from the day he was brought into their home.

He's a sorry excuse for a protector, and it's evident in the crying, broken teenager in his arms. He let someone he knows to be dangerous hurt him, and now they're all suffering for it.

(He's ignoring the fact that he didn't *know*, really, until recently. He *should* have known, as soon as he heard about this place, that nothing good could come of it.)

He raises his head only to try and clear his eyes on his sleeve, and meets Phil's gaze. His own guilt, heartbreak, *shame* is reflected in the clear blue-green of his gaze, a unique suffering.

He presses soft kisses into Tommy's hair, tears dripping down his face. "I'm sorry," he whispers, holding him tighter and feeling his heart break into shards of glass when he lets out a choked whine. "I'm so sorry..."

“It’s not your fault,” Phil murmurs, one hand resting on Tommy’s back and the other finding it’s way into Techno’s hair, around the back of his neck, grounding him to reality. “Neither of you are at fault. I’m sorry that I didn’t protect you.”

Techno has to force himself not to shatter worse than his own heart at the words, holding himself together with the promise of vengeance and a consuming need to help Tommy.

## Chapter End Notes

important side note: we hit over 1000 kudos between last chapter and this one!!! pog!!!  
thank you all so much for supporting my brainrot hyperfocus fanfic <3

i hope you enjoy!

## draw blood, taste water / and drink it 'til there's no more

### Chapter Notes

(vibrates) IM SO EXCITED FOR THIS CHAPTER !!!!

ahem. okay. so. this chapter has been the most fun to work on (was it because i got to torture techno?? maybe...) and i had the best time. so much good stuff.

WARNING, though, that it's fairly graphic! i've updated the tags and considered upping the rating, because,,, it's. uh. really violent. there's some graphic descriptions of injuries, dream is there being the worst, there's literally a planned execution, etc. nobody is having a good time.

a bit of timeline clarity: this chapter takes place about a week-ish after the last one! so things have happened off screen, but nothing major :-)

this is also set up the way it is on purpose! (i'm totally just not bad at writing everything in one linear timeline!)

i wonder how many people are going to yell at me for villain tubbo. im sorry he's just *really* fun to write going off the rails

anyway, please enjoy a good happy chapter where (technoblade voice) Nothing Goes Wrong :-)

title from lukewarm by penelope scott (big snow au techno vibes)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno has to give credit where credit is due; they managed to get the jump on him.

The day started very calmly. He had woken up in an absolutely neutral mood, not feeling much of anything, which is a blessing after weeks of nightmares. He didn't sleep enough, but it's fine.

He gets up and dresses himself warmly, mindful of Phil sleeping deeply across the room. It's just after dawn, and the world is completely quiet. Everything is muffled by the lightly falling snow outside.

He decides, regrettably, that today is probably a braces day. He's been doing too much with his hands. It's not as bad as in his fighting days, when he wore the leather braces all the time, but it's close.

He slips his hands into the familiar braces and tightens them appropriately. They hug his hands like old friends. He hates them, hates that he needs them, but they *help*.

He drops down from the loft quietly. Tommy is asleep, as he always is this early unless he has a nightmare. His bed is a proper nest right now, layers of blankets and such practically obscuring his body. All he can really see of him is his hair and his wings, both very fluffy. His breath rattles only slightly as he sleeps.

It's very cute; it's the exact same way he slept when he was little. His tail flicks with affectionate delight he'd never admit to if it wasn't so early.

Techno builds up the fire a little more, wanting to keep the boy warm. He puts his hair up quickly to keep it out of the way, and digs himself out something to eat. Hmm, he's feeling like an apple and a glass of milk this morning. It's a very light breakfast, admittedly, but he isn't close to hungry.

After a moment's consideration, he starts some coffee and resolves to have some when he comes back in from tending to the animals.

He scribbles out a note, just in case either of them wakes up. He even puts a flourish on his name, for the hell of it.

The neutral mood is becoming a good one.

He sets the note on the counter, gently runs his fingers through the kids hair, and grabs his cloak and sword.

The sun is rising, making the sky brighten. He secures the cloak around his shoulders, his sword at his side.

He feeds Carl, the two of them in a companionable quiet as he does. He rubs his ears and pats his flank before he leaves. (He needs to take him out some more. He's been pretty housebound as of late.)

The bees are fine, buzzing happily in their containment. Their noise is comforting in the stillness, before the birds have even begun to chirp. The turtles are equally fine.

The farm will have to wait, either until Phil wants to help or until his hands are better, whatever comes first.

He breathes in the cool morning air, stretching in the slightly-warming sunlight, and decides to go have his coffee. He feels very... calm.

Sure, he's still stressed and worried, he always is, but in the moment, he's calm. No voices, no anxiety, no sadness. Just him and the creaking of the trees and the first chirps of birds and—

—*the telltale sound of a crossbow loading.*

Fine-tuned instinct sparks through him, and his hands wrap around the hilt of his sword. He draws it, the netherite dragging roughly against the leather scabbard, and holds it out carefully.

His ears perk, trying to figure out where the sound came from. Away from the house, in the western bank of trees... he can smell something, too. Something familiar. His sense of smell isn't too fantastic, but it's keener than a human, and he knows what this is, he just— can't put a finger on it...

He creeps towards the trees. His hands protest the tight grip he has on the hilt, but he couldn't let go if he tried.

The voices are back, full of concern.

*Dangerous!*  
*Coming for you!*



*Bad plans!*  
*Butchers!*  
*Potion!*  
*Save Tommy!*

They're all talking over each other, mostly single-words and panic, but he gets the gist. Someone is there to hurt him, and his little brother is in danger too.

Do they know he's there? No, they'd use him as leverage if they did. So as long as he gets to them first...

"Who's there?" He calls, low and dangerous, as he steps into the bank of trees. His tail whips, fur on end.

He realizes when he hears glass shatter above his head that he made a *mistake*. Maybe his instincts aren't as keen as he thought. Maybe retirement and family and the odd, soft pieces of his heart growing larger did dull him a little.

But a potion showers over him, half liquid and half mist, being drawn into him through a gasp and subsequent choking for air on the too-sweet flavor.

His hands go numb first, fingers unclenching from around his sword. It falls to the slightly-less-snowy ground.

His head swims with sudden lightness, like he hasn't eaten in days and tried to stand. His temples throb and his vision briefly blurs, despite his glasses. His stomach feels both empty and full of nausea. His limbs feel heavy and leaden.

That's what the smell was. A goddamn weakness potion. A pretty strong one, too, to be able to affect him.

"Who's there," he asks again, voice coming out thick.

A familiar-ish figure with black hair swept under a beanie and a pair of shining wings steps out from behind a thick birch, grinning maliciously, an axe in hand.

Techno blinks at him until he can recognize the face.

Quackity. Behind him, Tubbo follows, horns gleaming slightly in the low light of the dawn. And then Fundy, orange fur a bright contrast to all the white. And... Ranboo, following them uncertainly, not seeming to know what to do with the weapon he's holding.

He was fucking *ambushed* on his own property. It's almost funny.

*(How did they find me? How? No one knows other than Phil and Ghostbur, and neither of them would tell anyone. Phil hasn't even been there in at least two weeks. Ghostbur has probably forgotten the way, honestly.*

*Who else knows where I am? Did Ranboo tell them? Is that why he looks so uncertain? Did the kid backstab me, exactly like I thought he would? God I shouldn't have let him visit the last few times, fuck, I'm so stupid--)*

"Well, fancy seeing you here, Technoblade." Tubbo says, just on the edge of being polite. He has a crossbow in hand, and he's smiling pleasantly.

“What are you doin’ here?” He asks, struggling to even get simple words out. His mouth feels like it’s full of honey, thick and sweet. “Didn’t know L’manberg had extended this far out.”

Quackity laughs, the usually-irritating sound somehow upsetting. Techno is very aware of the fact that he’s unarmored, while they’re in full netherite.

Why would he be wearing armor? He just went out to check on his animals and crops.

“We’re here to bring you to justice,” Quackity explains, expression gleeful.

He rolls his eyes. “Really. You came all the way out here to drag me into a trial or somethin’? Seems like a waste of time.”

“Oh, it’s not going to be a trial,” Tubbo says, still completely friendly. “It’s an *execution*, Technoblade.”

His tongue feels numb. “An execution,” he echoes, frowning. “Any way I can opt out of that? I’m a busy man.”

The crossbow nudges at his jaw and brings his somewhat-lolling head forward, so he can stare down into Tubbo’s coolly amused eyes, horizontal pupils and all. (He’s reminded of someone he doesn’t want to think about.)

“Not a chance,” he says, voice soft and almost sweet. When he grins, the scar across his face stretches. “Now,” he directs his order to his lackeys.

Before Techno can even try to fight, cool, iron handcuffs slide around his wrists and tighten to the point of an ache. They don’t have Binding, he’s sure of it, they don’t feel the same as that. *Small mercies.*

“Come on,” Quackity says, grin obvious in his voice. The blade of his axe presses against his spine and he shudders violently. “Walk.”

So, he walks. The potion is blurring his thoughts into an incoherent mess, and the fact that the voices are going insane isn’t helping either. They’re absolutely impossible to understand at the moment, and he has a migraine already.

They walk past the house. He isn’t sure what route they’re taking (he hasn’t been back to L’manberg at all, nor has he paid attention when Phil leaves) but they pass the house.

He makes one move for safety. Going down without a fight seems like a horrible idea, for himself and for his pride. And maybe it’ll make the voices shut up.

It’s all too easy to knock Quackity’s blade away, slamming his bound arms back to unbalance him, and step out of their reach with only a little bit of grace lacking. The potion is still impairing him, but what they know is that potions wear off of him pretty damn fast. It’s a product of overusing them, which he rarely thought would be useful.

He grins, showing off his teeth. “You thought I was goin’ to make it easy just because you drugged me?” He asks, ignoring the thickness of his voice. “Come on, I didn’t think you were all that dumb.”

He has to dodge when Ranboo swipes at him with his sword (all things considered, it’s not a bad move; the slightest tinge of fondness for the kid...) and almost stumbles, but he’s had practice fighting with his arms bound. Unfortunately.

He doesn't expect it when Tubbo smacks him across the face with his crossbow, though.

It actually does knock him over, stumbling to his knees in the snow. His nose is bleeding and his mouth aches. Immediately, he prods with his tongue for broken teeth-- nothing yet. Good. He has enough problems without knocking any teeth loose, or god forbid, his tusks.

A rough hand seizes his hair and he groans, grimacing at the painful sensation. You'd think he'd have a stronger scalp, but nah-- even the pulling of his hairbrush hurts most days. A strong hand is agony.

"I really don't want to have to cause you unnecessary pain, Techno. If you cooperate, you'll be back here by nightfall, safely respawned in your bed." Tubbo leans in front of him, his smile almost sympathetic. "And maybe you'll learn your lesson. Maybe not. But I don't want to have to hurt you unnecessarily, so can you behave?"

Techno grimaces again at the overly-polite tone in the teenager's voice. What the fuck has *happened* to him? The kid he knew not all that long ago wouldn't be so apparently gleeful about dragging a man to his death. But he's sure smiling about it like it's making him oh, so pleased.

(The scars on his face might explain it.)

Quackity (or maybe Fundy, he can't tell just from a gloved hand) yanks at his hair. He hisses, turning his head to try and see how he could fight his way out of this, when he hears a sound.

A sound he's not sure how to decipher, until his eyes land on the house.

In the big window, the one he leaves uncovered in the morning because they can see the sunrise and it's *beautiful*, he can see a green-clad figure with a frighteningly white mask, leaning right over where he knows Tommy's bed is.

The sound is Tommy's voice, indistinct because of the distance even with his keen ears, likely begging or apologizing—

*No no no no no--*

He lurches against the hand holding him, managing to get free without losing a handful of hair, and scrambles forward to try and get on his feet.

*Oh god, no, not this, not this, not **now**, Tommy's getting better!*

He thinks Tommy could theoretically handle Techno being executed, because he'd just show up back at home after respawn. That's fine. What's definitely not fine is him being in the hands of the man who practically broke him again.

(It also clicks in his head. *Dream probably lead them here.*

Because getting him cursed wasn't bad enough.)

The flat of a blade smacks across the side of his head and he falls forward into the snow, not bothering to restrain an angry squeal. "Fuck you, let me go!" He snaps, pushing himself up on his shoulder and straining his wrists against the cuffs.

*Have to get inside*

*Help Tommy!!*

**KILL DREAM KILL DREAM KILL DREAM**

*Blood for the blood god*

**REMEMBER YOUR PROMISE.**

“I told you to cooperate with us,” Tubbo sighs, and now his hand, distinct in how deceptively small it is for how strong it seems, tangles at the top of his hair, yanking him up onto his knees again.

Even as he tries to struggle away, he holds firm until he swears the strands will tear from his head and leave him bloody. He forces himself to stop then, still practically twitching with rage but unwilling to weaken himself further.

“Fundy, we have another one of those potions, right?” Tubbo asks calmly, still holding his hair to keep him in place.

“Yeah, we do,” The fox’s voice is almost too pleased.

Techno goes for his last ditch effort, and screams as loud as he can, hoping and praying that it jars Phil into consciousness so he can protect Tommy.

*Oh god **please** you stupid bird man, wake up or I’ll never forgive you, **ever** , I’ll kill you, wake up!*

“Shut up,” someone says, and his jaw is grabbed so tight it aches. “or we’ll fucking gag you.” That’s Quackity, then. The level of venom suits him.

In response, he snaps at his hand with his teeth. *Caged animal* , the voices screech. He has to agree.

He can’t see the window anymore. His eyes are blurry, though not from tears of sorrow. It’s all pain and feral rage.

His head is pulled back forward, and Quackity’s gloved thumb hooks behind his bottom teeth, to pull open his jaw. He can’t bite him at this angle, but he hates the way it feels. He feels cut open already, vulnerable and easily harmed.

He hears a bottle be opened with the pop of a cork. He snarls as best he can with his mouth held open.

“Now, you’re going to cooperate and drink this, or we’ll just let you choke until you pass out and drag your body to L’manberg.” Tubbo’s voice is still kind, though he can barely hear it over the rush of blood in his ears. “What’s it going to be, Techno?”

Quackity removes his thumb. He draws in a ragged breath. “G-give me the potion.”

Tubbo grins down at him. “Good choice, Techno. I knew you wouldn’t make this harder for yourself.” He doesn’t hand over the potion, though, considering the state of his bound arms; he tips it into his mouth and lets him drink it like that.

It’s humiliating, it’s hard to swallow in this angle, and some of it spills over the edges of his lips. But he manages to swallow it.

The heaviness hits him hard, along with a sharp shock of pain through his whole body. Weakness and harming, then. Maybe something else. He’s too weary to figure it out.

It makes him very pliant, apparently, because he can’t protest when he’s dragged to his feet and prodded into walking again.

He stares back at the house until it disappears behind the trees and the gloom of the snow.

He feels like he's failed.

—

Tommy wakes up and the house is still quiet. The sun is just rising and his blankets are warm, comfortable, heavy wool draped over him. He stretches out in his nest, on his belly, all muscles extending as he stretches the length of his bed and then flops back down, boneless.

He can smell fresh spruce burning in the fireplace, and the scent is soothing. And he can smell coffee, so Techno's obviously up.

He yawns and rolls onto his back, pushing himself up on an elbow and glancing towards the kitchen. "G'mornin', Techno," he drawls sleepily, sitting up properly and crossing his legs on the blankets.

His eyes land on the figure he briefly thought was Technoblade, and any sense of warmth he's felt for the past two months disappears. He's suddenly very, very awake.

Dream tilts his masked head at him and hums a laugh. "Hey, little bird." His voice is all too sweet.

Tommy's brain trips into overdrive. He needs a weapon. Where does Techno keep the weapons? He has no idea, he won't let him have one because he doesn't trust him with a blade yet. Which, yeah, fair, he had to clean his cuts and everything, but god he *needs* one right now.

Where's Techno? And Phil? Why is Dream *here*?

"Y'know, I figured Techno knew something about where you were," Dream says casually, practically drawling. "But I didn't think he'd let you stay with him! It's pretty sweet, when I think about it."

He has a hand on his sword and he's bouncing a little as he talks. He's anticipating this, *excited* almost.

Tommy scrambles back on the edge of the bed. "Don't get close to me," he whispers sharply, breath wheezing as he tries not to fall into a full panic attack. His wing aches like Dream's hand is around it again.

Dream hums. "I don't think you get to make demands right now, Tommy. After you ran away and scared me half to death... I was so *worried* ." He crosses his arms and tilts his head, making a light tsking sound that reminds him bizarrely of Tubbo.

"I... y-you don't care about m-me," god why is he stuttering, he got over that years ago, "you just — y-you just wanted me to b-be where you could control me and hurt me if I did anything w-wrong." He wraps his arms around himself, ignoring the urge to hunch down into himself, to make himself small. Dream wants him to be *small* , so he— so he'll try not to be.

He taps his foot, just a little impatient. "Of course I care about you, little bird," his voice is smooth and gentle, familiar in a way that makes traitorous warmth build in Tommy's chest. "I'm your friend, aren't I? The only one you've got left?" He tilts his head far to the right and he can feel his eyes on him. "I care about you a lot."

Outside, there's some kind of commotion. He can't tell what it is, but he can hear the impact of two hard materials meeting with a painful thunk, and voices, and footsteps in the snow. There are

people outside. Why are there— why are there people outside?

Fuck, he can't think straight. Is anyone even there? He can't see the window because of Dream.

"Is that what they've been telling you?" Dream asks, honey-sweet sympathy dripping from his words. "That I never cared about you? Oh, Tommy, *Tommy* . I thought you were smarter than that." He taps his fingers along the hilt of his sword. "Of course Technoblade would tell you I didn't care. He doesn't like me at all. In fact, I'm pretty sure he hates me."

Tommy thinks about Techno's flat horror after Dream visited. His nightmares. The nameless evil that he constantly seems to be combating. That scar on his arm, that wasn't there one day and then he went out with Dream and then it *was* there. He thinks about shortened pink hair and the last time he thinks he genuinely saw him break down. He thinks about four months without hearing his brother's voice.

"And of course, Philza doesn't trust me because *Techno* doesn't trust me. And *they* trust each other more than anything." Dream chuckles. "More than *you* ."

That hurts, a lot, and Tommy does hunch now. It's not— true. Not anymore. They trust him, right?

Outside, someone screams. The voice is between animal and human, but undeniably desperate and full of pain.

*Is that Techno?*

"But I promise, Tommy... I'm your friend. I just want you to be safe and happy." Dream steps forward, suddenly so close he's honestly crowding Tommy into his messy bed. His heart rate spikes and he can hear a whining sound that he's fairly sure is him.

"You— you broke my wing," he whispers, hugging himself, staring at Dream's mask with tears welling in my eyes. "Y-you wouldn't let me f-fly and you broke my wing and I-I— you made me want t-to *kill myself* ." He's never admitted that last part to himself. Sure, he's thought about it, but he's never admitted it was Dream's fault...

"I had to do that, to keep you safe," His voice is so patient, it reminds him of Wilbur and *oh, that's a bad comparison he doesn't want to think about Wilbur right now*. "If you had just listened to me, I wouldn't have had to do that to you!" Stepping closer, so close he could grab him, and the whining sound is definitely him because it gets choked off as he begins to cry.

He's frighteningly hyperaware of everything about Dream right now.

How this mask must be new, because it's practically unblemished, just pure white porcelain and black eyes and that smile that makes his skin *crawl* . Even though his voice is kind and he's sure he's smiling under the mask, he has his hand wrapped around his sword. He's humming lightly as he thinks and the sound makes him want to scream.

"It's really all your fault, you know," Dream says with a sigh, like Tommy's perceived misbehavior is genuinely painful for him. "You were doing so well! I was considering letting you visit L'manberg again, I was considering letting you have a little more freedom, but no, you hid things from me and then you ran away--"

His hand darts forward and wraps tightly around Tommy's wrist, yanking him forward so hard his shoulder makes a disturbing popping sound. It isn't dislocated (yet?) but it hurts and it only makes him sob more, trying to scratch at Dream's hand and wrist to free himself.

“I’m really, really disappointed. I thought we were making progress, but I’m worried we’re going to have to start over.”

Another loud sound outside. A voice he thinks he should recognize, rendered unintelligible due to the window and the distance. It’s hard to focus on anything but Dream’s hand and Dream’s mask and how he can hear Dream chuckling at his pathetic attempt to free himself.

He’s pulled up to his feet-- his shoulder aches and he’s forced to wobble over onto his left side and it hurts-- and Dream makes an appraising noise as he glances out the window. “They’re about done out there. Let’s get going.”

“No!” Tommy hates how squeaky and choked his voice comes out, as he pulls at his arm and holds the other against his chest. He feels so tiny and helpless and the fact that he’s crying doesn’t help. “Let me go, I’m not going anywhere with you, I *hate* you--”

Dream slaps him. Backhands him, really. The clasp of his glove cuts into his cheek and he stumbles to the side, losing his footing and falling to his knees. He’s still holding his wrist, so his arm is wrenched above his head and oh-- fuck, this is way too vulnerable of a position.

Where are Phil and Techno? They’ve both said they won’t let anything happen to him, and yet, this is happening, Dream is going to take him away and the whole thing is going to repeat itself. He isn’t strong enough for it to happen again. He’ll break into whatever he wants of him, he doesn’t want to give him that satisfaction--

“Come on, little bird,” Dream says, softness gone, back to the angry maniac he was the day he ran away. He digs his nails into his arm until blood begins to well and it looks terrifying red. “Don’t make me break your arm. I don’t like hurting you like that, but I will.”

His vision is going black at the edges, because his breathing is too shallow. He can vaguely taste blood in his mouth, though he isn’t sure where it’s from. His lungs or his mouth?

“You’re not helping yourself at all, fighting me,” he snarls, pulling him back to his feet and dragging him to the window. “You see that? Technoblade isn’t going to be able to help you, little bird.”

Tommy blinks furiously in an attempt to see what’s going on. Everything looks blurry from his tears and the bright sunrise, but things begin to clear.

Four figures in armor. Blood splattered on the snow. The gleam of weaponry.

Pink hair, knocked loose from whatever style it was in, shining like a candle in the sunlight. Techno, being held in place by-- looks like Big Q?-- and having a potion poured into his mouth by-- by--

He chokes on a sob. That’s-- that’s Tubbo, he can see his horns because he isn’t wearing a helmet and his tail stubbornly pokes out from underneath his chestplate like it always has. Why the fuck is Tubbo here, forcing a potion down Techno’s throat? Why is any of this *happening* ?

“See? He’s all tied up at the moment.” Dream laughs, a short, mean sound. “Not that I think he’d come and save you. He didn’t care before, why would he now?”

The rage that fuels him is hotter than the still burning fire. None of this is fair. Techno is out in the snow, bloody, drugged, being taken away in some form or another. Tubbo is-- something’s obviously *wrong* with him. Phil hasn’t come to save him. Dream is going to take him back.

He's not going to let him.

Tommy grits his teeth, fighting against how helpless he feels, and slams his body back against Dream. He obviously wasn't expecting it, because his grip loosens for a second and he takes a faltering step to the side.

He takes the liberty of raising an elbow to slam it into his stupid mask. The porcelain shatters, because for all his faults, he's still stronger than he looks.

It helps that he has rage-fueled adrenaline rushing through him.

Dream curses, all thick, and when he looks up, his mask has completely fallen away. His face is bloody, and if Tommy's seeing it right, he has a tooth missing.

It feels good, to hurt him. He grins.

"Oh, so we're doing it like this, huh?" Dream asks, wiping the blood from his face with his sleeve. He bares his teeth-- yep, one is missing on top, to the right. He feels good about that. "Fine, then. You want me to be mean, little bird?"

He reaches back and grabs his axe from his back.

"Do you remember what I told you would happen if you disobeyed me again?" He asks, voice calm.

Tommy steps back, hands in fists, scanning the room for anything he could use as a weapon. There are knives in the kitchen, he knows exactly where they are. If he can just get over there...

Dream lunges forward, effectively knocking him off his feet, and attempts to wrestle him onto his stomach.

Panic replaces the adrenaline. *He's going to cut my wings off!*

"If you would just-- fucking-- *behave*, I wouldn't have to do this. It's really all your fault, little bird." His eyes are sharp with a manic delight. "If you keep fighting, I'll make it worse for you. Sit still and it won't hurt too bad."

Tommy spits in his face, just because it sounds like a good idea. It's tinted slightly red.

Dream hits him again, but he barely feels it. He can barely breathe and everything aches and he's going to have his wings hacked off with an axe. Maybe he'll die. Maybe Dream will finally kill him and he'll be free from the fucking nightmare that is existence.

"Oh, little bird. You really like riling people up, don't you." He's turned partially on his side, until Dream can grab his broken wing and straighten it out.

He doesn't give in. He just... goes *still*, stiff, doesn't actively fight, just makes it harder for himself to be manhandled.

Tommy stares at the wall as he feels his blade brush against his feathers.

And then, a sound he hesitates to say is comforting, but is definitely welcome. The slash of a sword, followed by Dream letting out a harsh cry of pain.

"Get off," Phil growls, low and dangerous and colder than the wind outside, "of my son."



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The smash of the anvil against Techno's ribs is comparable to being stabbed, only much, *much* more intense. He feels a few ribs crack, too much squishing to be healthy, and so much blood begins to pour.

It's so intense that his vision goes blurry and he screams, loud and animalistic.

All he can see is bright red and a few white flashes. His head is spinning, and he can't see well at all, he can't even make his eyes focus.

His... his glasses are broken, he notices blearily, sitting on the floor of the execution stage with a spiderweb crack through both lenses and the arms crooked. That sucks; he has a spare pair at home, but that's so far away...

There's a hole in the iron bars. And in his ribs, too. And— and the anvil is smashed into the stone bricks under his feet. He's only on his feet because his whole body is tense with pain and the adrenaline from the totem.

He needs to get out. There's some kind of commotion nearby, explosions? They're all distracted anyway, he can hear them yelling. He needs to get away.

He stumbles out of the hole in the bars, wrapping his now bloodsoaked cloak around himself and pressing a hand to his shredded shirt and ribcage to stem the bleeding.

His fingers touch something. Hard. His ribs. He's touching his own ribs and oh god this is a *nightmare*. He thought— he always thinks the totem will be more like respawning, but no. It just feels like he's been yanked away from something infinitely more comfortable than this.

He keeps walking. There are definitely explosions behind him, he can feel the heat of them on his back, but they don't pursue him. Whatever is happening has taken their attentions away from him.

His vision is all blurry, with tears or blood or lack of glasses or just pain. He's shaking, a significant amount, to the point he keeps losing his grip on his wounded side. If he trips... he's not getting back up. He's going to die there.

And sure, he'll respawn (won't he? oh gods he hopes he will) but he knows it's an agonizing ordeal. It won't be like dying in games, in any sort of playful way; it'll be real, too real.

He can't believe he's actually missing places like Hypixel, right now, but he is. Things were simpler, before he was tempted into this godforsaken server.

He needs to get home. Home is good; home means Tommy and Phil and Marnie the stuffed pig and his fireplace. He's so cold, his fingers feel numb. Maybe that's the blood loss or the fact that his hands kind of fucking suck.

He hasn't been this hurt in. A while. Years, surely. Because he's Technoblade, he can get himself out of any situation with little more than scratches and perhaps some damaged armor, at most.

He's not sure how he's going to get out of this one.

(It reminds him of the day he got stabbed.

He was eighteen. He was miles ahead of everyone else his age in terms of skill, but still, nowhere close to perfect.

His hands were his downfall. He had been fighting all day, back to back with Phil. He can't remember why they were fighting, just that it was a nasty, bloody affair, and the voices were delighted about it.

His hands trembled once before giving out entirely, his fingers loosening around his blade until it fell to the ground.

Panic filled him up to his head as the person in front of him grinned, and plunged their sword into his side.

It was... it wasn't painful, not at first. It just felt bizarre and *violating*, as the sword stabbed through the flesh just above his hip and then was withdrawn just as fast. He didn't make a sound beyond a gasp, one hand going to the wound and the other tugging his skull mask further over his face to hide his teary eyes.

Phil, blessedly, did not see him get stabbed. He hid it until they were safely back wherever they were living at the time, when the pain got to the point he couldn't breathe without whimpering.

He remembers every word of that scolding.)

He's not sure how he's going to get out of this one.

It's a long, *long* walk home, and he's sure he'll go unconscious long before he gets there. He doesn't have his communicator— because of course he left it at home, likely laying on the kitchen counter unassumingly.

By any luck, Phil got Tommy away from Dream, and hopefully killed the bastard mercilessly for good measure. But he isn't particularly optimistic; luck is rarely on his family's side.

Gods, everything hurts. From his feet, aching from however far they had to walk, to his hands, twitching and overwhelmed after trying to fight, to the hole in his ribs, which hurts so badly it almost *doesn't* anymore.

He isn't sure how far he walks, but he ends up stopping next to some building and leaning on the wall. He can't draw a full breath. Suddenly, he's very scared the impact of the anvil damaged something much deeper than just a broken rib or two. It makes him start to shake even worse.

He needs to look at the wound.

He swallows a mouthful of blood and saliva and bile, and pries both his cloak and his shirt away from his side.

His vision goes blurry looking at it. It's all red and bits of white and something black (bits of metal?) and it looks almost alien. He hasn't been this hurt in—in— in forever? Has he *ever* been this hurt?

From just at his collarbone to the bottom of his ribcage on his right side is just. Broken skin and damaged muscle. It ranges from a mild scrape at his collarbone to an outright *hole* in his ribs, higher up, and then more minor but still awful scrapes down his side.

Along the outermost edges of the wounds, the torn flesh is already beginning to show signs of rot, in the whitening of the skin, the faintest trace of green along the edges...

Oh no.

He hasn't been hurt enough for his body to resort to rotting in a long time. It's a biological quirk they discovered when he was small; in fact, Phil figured it out before he did, seeing as he spent the first two weeks with him pretty much unconscious.

When he's severely injured, his body seems to pick up on some latent piglin blood and decides to begin zombifying him. Because why not, right?

He draws in a ragged breath and starts walking again, after carefully removing his shirt and wrapping it around his middle as a makeshift bandage.

At most, he has a few hours until the rot really sets in. He just has to find his way home before then. Easy. He's the Human GPS, he can get himself home.

Right?

He keeps struggling. He's not even out of L'manberg yet.

He. Isn't sure if he remembers how to get out, honestly. Blood loss... sucks, his brain feels like it's slowly shutting down. The fact that he got drugged doesn't help either. He can't even focus on the voices, despite the fact that they're definitely talking. Probably making fun of him, which is fair. Literally anyone could kill him right now.

"Hey!"

He jolts at the somewhat-familiar female voice, before letting out a low moan of pain. Everything shifted when he jumped.

"Technoblade," Niki says, slightly breathless as she comes up next to him. "I saw what happened. God, I am so *sorry*. I don't know what's wrong with people here—"

"No time," he says through gritted teeth, even though her face is a familiar and comforting sight. It makes him think of being a teenager, because Niki was the only one of Wilbur's friends he genuinely felt he clicked with. (Schlatt was a... *weird* exception.) "What do you want?"

Her face gets stony. "I want to help you. You're trying to get out of the country, yeah?"

He nods. She briskly takes him by the arm and leads him down another path. He has little reason to trust her, other than her generally having a good track record and being dependable.

He swallows his natural distrust and follows her. He's hurt and he's disoriented and god he just wants to go home and lay down with his head on Phil's lap for a little while. He wants to feel like a tired little kid again, he wants his dad to brush out his hair and put him to bed like he did back then.

He's so tired. If getting home means trusting someone, he's going to do it.

"I know a few good paths out," Niki brushes her hands off on her shirt. "Where do you need to go?"

Techno swallows more than this distrust. Mostly saliva and bile. He refuses to vomit, because he's fairly sure that'll break something inside of him. "N...North. Been livin' in the tundra."

"Okay," she says, nodding. She takes a bag off her shoulder and digs through it for a moment. "You can take healing pots, right? They won't accidentally kill you or anything?"

He shakes his head lightly. His throat hurts too badly to talk more than necessary, even breathing makes pieces of his broken ribs press uncomfortably into his insides. “C-could use harming, too, if you’ve got t-that and a cloth.”

“Why would you need harming?” She asks, handing over the healing potion. When she notices how weak his hands are, she puts his palms around the bottle gently. Her hands are somehow calloused and soft at the same time. Her nails are painted blue, and he’s not sure why his brain latches into that detail. “Just take that, for now. Once we can stop, I’ll try and see if I can patch you up.”

Techno nods—it sounds like it's a better plan than his, which was essentially “*wander until I either make it home or die*”.

He uncorks the potion with his teeth—he barely trusts himself to grip the bottle, uncorking it would be a nightmare—and takes almost the whole thing in one drink. It’s a full dose, an expertly brewed potion, so the effect is immediate and disorienting.

His entire body goes warm, like he’s slipped into a comfortably hot bath, and he can feel his skin begin to grow back together. He groans lowly at the feeling of the healing taking place, and of his rotting skin protesting against the magic. His head feels fuzzier, like he’s drunk, but in an objectively pleasant way.

He swallows the last of it and clutches the bottle in his shaking hands. “Thank you,” he says, voice still ragged.

“No problem. Figured you’d need it,” Niki is walking quickly, but she doesn’t seem to be outpacing him on purpose. Her shining, white-gold wings are folded against her back and the feathers shift in color as the light passes over them. “What happened to you? You disappeared, after everything...”

“I’m retired,” he mumbles. The healing is still taking effect and it’s weird. Maybe it’ll help his hands, though. (His braces are covered in blood, and fleetingly he realizes how awful it's going to be to clean the leather.) “Been tryin’ to keep to myself.”

“That makes sense,” she says, leading him towards a small bridge over the lake. It looks rickety but serviceable. “I’d do the same. I-- I don’t actually live here, anymore. I was only here for the day, to check on something... good thing I was, then...” She sighs heavily. She looks... really tired. He remembers her looking a lot more lively before all this happened.

*This server is cursed*, a voice offers. He tries not to laugh, because *what do you know about cursed?*

Instead, he wipes either potion or blood from his mouth and follows her along the bridge. “Why’re you helpin’ me, Niki?” He sounds immature, but he doesn’t care. It doesn’t make *sense*.

“I have plenty of reasons,” she glances back at him, a small, tired smile on her mouth. “You’re my friend, for one. And you... you’re Wil’s brother, and I don’t think he’d forgive me if I let you die here.”

“We’re friends?” He asks thickly, suddenly a tiny bit choked up between that and the idea that Wilbur would still be protective over him, after all they’ve both done.

She nods, turning forward again. “And... I couldn’t just let them *kill you*. This place... it isn’t L’manberg, not really. It hasn’t been for a long time. So I’m not... I’m not supporting their actions

anymore.” She holds her head high, shoulders strong. Her wings flare out slightly, and he wonders if it's an involuntary action; he's seen every avian hybrid he knows do that when feeling threatened or confident. “Wilbur was right. The place he built doesn't exist anymore. It's just... a *shell* . And I'd like to take it down.”

Techno admires her strength in a way he can't explain. Sure, he's strong, but she just-- she sounds so much more *there* , so much more genuine. She's *morally* stronger, he thinks. (She wouldn't be peer-pressured into killing a teenager and then subsequently killing everyone. He thinks she could cause real change, if she wanted to.)

“Here,” Niki says, leading him to a patch of trees just off the bridge. There's a collection of large, fallen logs. “Sit down, I'll patch you up before you go.”

He doesn't argue, sitting down heavily on a log and closing his eyes. The potion has chased away his exhaustion, but he's had so much in his system today, he can feel a horrible crash in his future.

That's fine, he knows how to deal with bad comedowns. He just needs to get *home* first.

He takes off his cloak when instructed, and tries not to either shudder or blush when she inspects his chest-- er, the wound.

“I was going to say it wasn't that bad, but... it's pretty bad,” Niki admits, taking out bandages from her bag along with another potion. He knows the look of it-- it's a diluted healing potion, ideal for cleaning wounds. "I'm sure there's an obvious answer, but... why are you *rotting*?" She's doing an excellent job concealing her horror.

Techno can't help his low snort of amusement. It hurts his lungs and he feels like something stabs him. "Some stupid piglin quirk. Only happens when 'm really hurt."

"Ah, that makes sense," she says. "Well, I mean. You do have a giant hole in your chest. I think a few of your ribs are broken, and... something is definitely damaged inside..." she frowns, brows knitting. "I think this is a little above my head, but I can at least keep it from getting infected, if that'll help?"

He decides not to point out the fact that his body has technically infected itself. "That'll definitely help."

She nods and wets a cloth with the potion.

He bites at his lip and looks away from her, as she dabs at his wounds. "...thanks."

She hums, tucking her hair behind her ear with her free hand. "You're welcome."

--

Tommy knows he probably shouldn't *watch*.

But god, does it feel so satisfying, in the worst possible way, to see Dream struggle to his feet and stare fearfully at Philza. Even with his axe in hand and his face set in anger, he still looks like he knows he's outmatched.

To be fair, he looks terrifying. His eyes hold no warmth, simply enough icy rage to fill an ocean, and he's grinning, mean and harsh. His wings are spread behind him, seeming to entirely consume the room with dark feathers and strong muscle. They almost seem to shimmer the same as the netherite sword in his hands.

Even in sleep clothes, scruffy-faced, and obviously still tired, he looks every bit the warrior he's always been.

Tommy feels an absurd pride, because *there's* the man who raised him. There's the Angel of Death, in all his glory.

Dream steadies himself and bares his blade, giving an equally mean smile. "Oh, so now you care about Tommy?" He asks, tilting his head. "About *time* , Philza. Really."

Phil doesn't even blink at the attempted taunt. He just steps forward, sword not even raised. He seems so completely unintimidated.

The masked man seems to scramble for some kind of taunt, because his words tend to be a good part of his power, but before he can, Phil shoves him back, sending him sprawling to the floor.

It suddenly seems so clear that Dream is just a lanky twenty-something with an axe, stripped of his mask and not looming over some more vulnerable person. In this situation, he has very little, if any, power.

Tommy scrambles back to sit against the edge of his bed, watching with morbid fascination as Dream tries to get back to his feet and is promptly kicked down. As Phil raises his sword and puts it under his chin, pressing its tip to his skin so hard he immediately begins to bleed.

"You talk a lot of big game for someone who spends most of his time manipulating kids, mate," he says, almost casual if it wasn't for the edge of a growl in it. "You couldn't even have the decency to target an adult with your bullshit? Tommy's *sixteen* . Really not a good look for you, Dream."

The hysterical laugh that leaves Tommy is absolutely involuntary.

"I'm not--" Dream chokes as Phil sets a foot on his chest and pushes the sword in closer. Blood is dripping from the wound like candlewax. "I'm not *manipulating* him, I'm just trying to keep him safe and stopping him from hurting anyone--"

"Oh, you're more deluded than I thought." His wings ruffle and he chuckles, the sound like ice. "He told us what you did. You're either malicious or stupid, and I don't know which one's worse. Not letting him fly, breaking his wing-- with your bare hands, no less. You might be able to convince Tommy you were doing good for him, but I'm not as easily misled. I might have failed as a father, but at least I'm not as pathetic as you."

Dream's eyes flash with something in the range of terror.

Tommy watches with wide eyes as Phil stabs him cleanly through the chest, the action smooth and practiced. Because it is.

Dream doesn't cry out, or even really react-- the only sign that it hurts him is a flinch of his face.

(Wilbur crumpling against Phil's shoulder, breathless laugh audible even from far away.)

He covers his face, then, curling himself into a little ball. The adrenaline and panic are gone now that the threat is subdued.

His face hurts where Dream slapped him and he's fairly sure he's bleeding both inside his mouth and along his cheekbone. His chest aches and every breath makes him jolt with pain. Both of his wings hurt and there are scratchmarks along his arm.

It can't be much past six in the morning.

Too much has happened.

"Tommy?" The rage is gone from Phil's voice. Tommy curls up a little tighter and nods in response. "Are you okay?" He asks, and he can hear him kneel next to him. "Can I touch you?"

He uncurls slightly, just enough to look over at where Dream lays, dead to the world, green eyes glassy. He has one hand on his chest, resting limply against his stab wound. He's dead, blood seeping out of his body and on the wood floor that Techno takes such good care of.

He's dead.

"He's dead!" Tommy says, voice coming out hysterical. He isn't sure why. Maybe because this all kind of feels like the weirdest nightmare and he's afraid this will be where it ends and he wants the satisfaction of saying it.

"Yeah, he's dead," Phil confirms, resting a hand on his arm gently. "Here, let me get you cleaned up--"

Tommy starts laughing, the sound bordering on crying, and throws himself into his father's arms, hugging him tight enough he's sure it hurts. "Thank you! Thank you thank you thank you--" he muffles himself by burying his face in his shoulder, words lost both in his shirt and the still-fluffed feathers of his wings.

"I-- of course, you're welcome." He pulls him closer and hugs him back just as tight. "Do you just need me to hold you for a minute?"

"Yeah," he mumbles out. He can't tell if he's awake, it all feels kind of surreal, but he hopes he is, because he feels so relieved. Sure, Dream isn't going to stay dead, he's sure he wasn't on his last life, but he'll be gone for at least a little bit. For at least a few days, they don't have to worry about him.

And it feels good.

Phil runs his fingers through his sweat-damp hair and kisses his forehead gently. "Did you knock one of his teeth out?"

Tommy's hysterical laugh returns. "Yeah. He showed me what was happening outside, and I was just so *mad*--" He freezes. "Did you see what was happening outside?"

A moment of tense silence. "Yeah," his voice is tense again, not quite rage but something close, "I did."

"What were they doing? Techno was all bloody, and-- Tubbo looked so... *wrong*..." Despair begins to sink into him again, thinking about how Tubbo seemed almost-- gleeful, in the glimpse he got of him. Nothing like his best friend, the kid he was so close to before all this happened. He tries to snuggle in closer, feeling cold despite the fire and his warmth. "Are we going to have to go after Techno?"

"...maybe," Phil sighs and when he glances up, his face is troubled. Conflicted. "It depends on you, really. You're hurt, and I'm sure Dream being so rough with you wasn't good for your lungs."

Seemingly on cue, Tommy coughs into his arm, violently. His chest seizes and he finds that it's hard to stop himself.

“So... until you’re better, I’ll stay here. Techno... he’ll find his way out of whatever happened, I’m sure.” He rubs his back as he coughs, trying to soothe him gently. “I’m staying with you, Tommy.”

Despite the fact that he’s actively hacking his lungs out, and everything kind of hurts, and his older brother who he’s finally on some kind of good terms with has been captured,

Tommy grins.

## Chapter End Notes

thank you very much for reading! please go drink some water!

also, im sorry to anyone who's comments ive never replied to! i end up feeling repetitive and responding coherently is lowkey so hard gkrdfhjkfhgd. i love all your comments regardless and i will kiss you on the forehead for all of them <3



# i'm not a man of substance, or so i'll pretend

## Chapter Notes

continuing to have a fucking blast writing this fic!!

the gap between this one and the last is the longest break i've taken so far :-0 feels weird. it took me a while because it was a pain in the ass dfklhfdjklhdfg

this chapter is a MONSTER, dude, there's so much here. four perspective switches. lots of emotions. philza backstory hints. just a Lot Going On.

i'm also posting this at 9am after working on it for 2 hours straight so it might not be my cleanest work. but i FINALLY got it done, which means i need to post it before i start hating it lmaooo. y'know how it is. if something doesn't make sense, we're callin it creative liberty and movin the fuck on

title from since i saw vienna by wilbur soot. yes we're back to the your city gave me asthma lyrics

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Cream-colored endstone crunches underneath his feet.*

*He's running, fingers clutched around the round shape of an ender pearl, so close to the edge, where he'll jump and throw it--*

*The ground below him begins to melt. A woman is screaming, her voice high and panicked and **distorted**, and he whips around to find her, but there's nothing but an abandoned jacket on the ground, a forest green smeared with black and purple against the melting stone.*

*Despair fills him, and he darts forward to grab it, wanting some piece of her, but he falls through a hole and plummets down to the purple-black void. He screams as well, because his wings are gone--*

*why are they gone?*

*-- and he can't catch himself as he falls, falls, falls--*

*Pain sparks through him as the fall begins to kill him, and he takes one more shallow, panicked breath as he--*

dies.

-

Phil wakes up with a gasp, disoriented. For too many heartbeats, the room is still obscured with end fog and the sinking feeling that he's falling.

He takes a deep, forceful inhale, deep enough to hurt his ribs. He's laying entangled in his blankets, he can feel them wrapped loosely around his legs and arms, one tangled around his chest. He runs

his hands over the woolen fabric and breathes deeply again.

Another nightmare. It could be worse; the surreal ones are *much* more manageable than the ones that make logical sense.

He untangles himself from his bed. His hands are a bit shaky, but seeing how normal the loft is helps to calm him down.

It's the same as it's been this whole time, wooden-paneled, a blue rug spread across the floor, the enderchest tucked into the corner next to Techno's armor, the windows covered by thick, black curtains. They block out most of the sunlight, though he can see enough to tell it's very early morning.

He gets up and stretches. The crack of his back and his knees is just about the thing he needed to snap himself back into reality.

And with awareness of reality comes an awareness of something being *wrong* .

Despite it being just at sunrise, Techno's already out of bed; his bed is even remade, blankets neatly tucked into place, that beloved pig plush of his laying against his pillows. It's too early to be awake already, even for him, and Phil's brows knit with concern.

(He's sure he's been having nightmares as well. He's just not sure how bad.)

And... what's that sound? Someone-- someone is talking, but it doesn't sound like either of his sons. They... don't get visitors out here. They've had exactly one, and this voice isn't Ranboo. They're isolated on purpose, for protection and solitude.

Fear spikes through him. The last vestiges of the nightmare curl around him, heightening his anxiety as he walks to grab his sword and briefly contemplates grabbing armor as well. No, that's probably not a good idea. For now, he'll just grab his sword. He's fine without armor.

As he grabs his sword, settling his fingers around it's hilt, he glances out the parted curtains. He doesn't expect to see anything.

He looks out the moment Technoblade is hit across the face with a crossbow.

(They don't even have the decency to shoot him.)

His eyes widen with horror as blood sprays from his face, and he falls to his knees. One of the armored figures surrounding him seizes a handful of his hair and pulls him upright. The snow is stained red.

The horror turns into a deep nausea when Tubbo-- oh, the poor kid-- leans in front of him. His horns gleam lightly in the sunrise, and Phil can see the edge of his grin. He's speaking, but he's too far away to hear him. Judging by the horrified grimace on Techno's face, it's nothing good.

The plans he had to go downstairs and figure out what that voice was all stutter to a stop. He has to go out and help him. He's bound by handcuffs, keeping his hands behind his back, and he looks wild, face bloody and twisted into a snarl.

Downstairs, the voice raises. His hair does as well.

Techno's head whips towards the house. He can see the attentive twitch of his ear and how his eyes widen with-- what? Alarm? Fear? Can he see something? Hear something?

He wrenches away from the person holding him-- Quackity?-- and moves quickly on his knees, trying to get to his feet.

("Where are you off to?" Quackity asked with light curiosity.

"Not sure yet," Phil answered, equally light. "Just... out. Can't stay in one place for too long, y'know?" He grabs his sword and secures it at his waist, grabbing his bag off the table and swinging it over his shoulder.

The wide smile he was given in response made his stomach turn. "Yeah, I get it. Be safe, alright?"

"...sure." He waved him off as he put on his hat, but he stayed right where he was.

Blocking his doorway, gold-hued wings twitching occasionally.

"Are you sure you don't have any plans?" He's grinning, now.)

Protective rage flares through him when a smaller figure-- he sees orange fur, perked ears, it must be Fundy-- raises his sword and smacks him in the head, sending him back to the snow. He can hear the feral snarl that leaves him, the sound enough to make him shiver even safely inside of the house.

Tubbo seizes his hair again, yanking him back into a kneeling position. The words still aren't intelligible, but this must be even worse, because he can hear another snarl as the group of assailants speak among themselves.

He sees the flick of a long tail on the tallest member of the party, and feels betrayal settle around his heart. Ranboo, really? The kid seemed so nice, so *trustworthy*, and they were both warming to him. (He's not too proud to admit that he reminds him of a much younger Techno, of their *glory days*.)

And now he's part of the group arresting his son, holding a sword and hovering next to the others.

"*I don't think he'll cause any harm*," Phil's own voice echoes through his head. He had insisted that Techno let his guard down a little, to let Tommy see his friend a few times.

Guilt mingles with the rage, and he turns sharply towards the ladder. He's going out there, and he's going to raise some hell.

Just as he opens the trapdoor with a kick, he hears Techno begin to scream. The sound is hauntingly familiar, strangled and somewhere between monster and man, and his whole body straightens briefly out of terror, wings splaying out and hands going tight around his sword.

He turns to the window. He doesn't want to, but he has to see what they did to him. So he can offer appropriate retribution.

He watches, horrified and a little spellbound, as Tubbo-- gentle, smart Tubbo, with his bright grin and love of insects and kind voice, the kid he saw as one of his own even when he wasn't really-- pours a brightly-shining potion into Techno's held-open mouth. He can hear him choking, can see the gleam of tears on his cheeks.

He practically falls down the ladder, feet meeting the floor lightly. He needs to get outside and help, he's going to kill everyone out there, emotional connections be damned, no one can make Techno look so broken--

*They'll see how he earned his title.*

Phil freezes, seeing a green-clad figure leaning over Tommy on the floor, a knee planted on his back, a hand wrapped around an axe's handle, another on his broken wing, stretching out the damaged limb. He's talking, voice low and amused.

"Oh, *little bird*. You really like riling people up, don't you."

Tommy is laying, limp, staring at the wall. He's not moving, save the blink of his eyelids.

Dream raises his axe, sliding it against his feathers. He's unmasked (he can see shards of porcelain on the floor) and briefly, he forgets all about Technoblade's situation outside.

His rage centers itself on the man wielding an axe against his youngest son.

In the space of a blink, he slashes his sword across his back, tearing open hoodie and shirt and flesh, blood spilling as easily as ink from a discarded well. The pained shout that leaves him is immensely satisfying, and he grins.

"Get off," he growls, grabbing the kid by the shoulder and yanking him away from Tommy, "of my son."

The fight is really over before it begins.

Dream stumbles up to his feet, face bloody, clothing just as if not more bloody. He's clutching his axe protectively, teeth showing as he grins, all anger. Red drips down his chin from a missing tooth. "Oh, so now you care about Tommy?" He asks, with a light tilt of his head. "About *time* , Philza. Really."

The taunt doesn't sink through the layers of anger, nor would it if they weren't there. He's all too aware that he hasn't been there, being reminded of it by some bastard kid who's done nothing but hurt his sons has little effect.

At the lack of reaction, he falters, for just a moment, green eyes widening, mouth opening.

Phil takes the liberty of shoving him onto his back and getting him sprawled out on the floor, looming over him with the scream of revenge only getting louder in his head. It almost has a voice, now, a howl for Dream's blood to be spilled. It's what he deserves.

He thinks about Tommy's nightmares. The scar along Techno's wrist, hidden by the bandages he wears around his hands and wrists. Tommy's twisted, broken wing, the precise nature of the break. Techno coming home soaked in blood, nearly catatonic.

(Dream used to be such a *nice* kid.)

Still grinning, unable to help it, he leans down to shove the blade of his sword under his chin. Blood begins to spill, and it makes his own sing with adrenaline.

The last time he had someone at swordpoint, he was frazzled, scared out of his mind. Now, it's nothing but hot rage and cool indifference, evening out into something *familiar* .

( *Kill him. Do it. You want to kill him. Been too long since you enjoyed it. **Kill him** .* )

Tommy scrambles away from him, backing up until he's against the bed. He can feel the weight of his teary blue eyes on him, he can feel the horror and confusion in them. He hates to scare the kid,

but he's sure he understands.

"You talk a lot of big game for someone who spends most of his time manipulating kids, mate," he says, light and conversational. "You couldn't even have the decency to target an adult with your bullshit? Tommy's *sixteen*. Really not a good look for you, Dream."

Tommy lets out a peel of hysterical giggles. Dream's eyes widen slightly and his hand twitches towards his axe.

He doesn't get that far, his starting words of "I'm not--" choking off with a gasp as he shoves the sword in closer, setting a foot on his chest. Blood drips from the wound steadily, pooling around his neck, soaking into his hair. "I'm not *manipulating* him, I'm just trying to keep him safe and stopping him from hurting anyone--"

"Oh, you're more deluded than I thought." He feels his wings spread out further, far enough to block out the sunlight from the windows, and he laughs, too low to be amused. "He told us what you did. You're either malicious or stupid, and I don't know which one's worse. Not letting him fly, breaking his wing-- with your bare hands, no less." A flicker of stronger rage mingled with guilt, and his own wing twitches with sympathetic pain.

"You might be able to convince Tommy you were doing good for him, but I'm not as easily misled. I might have failed as a father, but at least I'm not as pathetic as you."

The younger man's eyes flash with terror, but admirably, he doesn't react beyond a light flinch when he drives the sword through his chest.

(Wilbur's eyes widening as he stabbed him, his free arm raising to rest around his shoulders. The light, musical chuckle that left his mouth. How he slumped against him, breathing shallow. The drip-drip-drip of blood from his wound, from his mouth, sinking into his shoulder.

"Thank you," he murmured, voice thick. "Thank you.")

He withdraws the blade roughly. Dream's body raises briefly, an aborted attempt at movement in the form of his hand raising, and then he's limp, eyes glassy.

Blood drips from the blade and onto the floor, shiny red drops. His breathing is labored, though not with effort. His shoulders are shaking with tension. He can barely hold himself still.

(The tip of a blade sticking out of her stomach. Holding her body in his arms as the warmth left her.

A wet hand on his cheek, fingers twisted into unfamiliar claws. "Don't cry," she scolded softly. "Don't cry for me."

Digging a grave with shaking hands.)

Tommy whimpers next to them. Phil drops his sword, it clatters on the floor, and takes a shaking breath. The air is thick with the scent of copper and the fireplace is empty of its flames.

He somehow didn't get any blood on his clothes.

"Tommy?" He asks, unsurprised to find that his voice is too weak to sustain the rage. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't reply, so he kneels down next to him and hovers a hand over his shoulder. "Can I touch

you?" The anger falls away for concern, at how ragged and uneven his breathing is. All the physical activity must have made him unable to breathe as well as he's been able to for a while.

(He must have fought Dream, why else would he be bleeding?

Pride wells in his chest. *That's his boy.* )

Tommy raises his head, just slightly, his eyes settling on Dream's body. They were already wide-- they seem to be stuck that way, lately-- but they get bigger, locked on the bloody scene.

His voice comes out high with wild amusement. "He's dead!" He hugs his legs tighter against himself, mouth twisted in a grin so wide it looks painful.

Phil nods, resting a hand on his arm. He's so tense that he can feel the lines of his muscles. "Yeah, he's dead," he agrees quietly, trying to gently pull him out of his protective curl. "Here, let me get you cleaned up--"

Another round of hysterical laughter leaves him, tears welling in his wide eyes. He hesitates; *oh*, that laughter is too familiar.

(Techno's skull mask, splattered with red. Hysterical giggles leaving his mouth, his feet sinking into the bloody earth.)

(Wilbur's chaotic laughter, echoing around the small room. His hair disheveled, his eyes wild.)

He feels tears prick his own eyes when Tommy throws himself against his chest, hugging him until his ribs ache just a little. "Thank you!" He says, practically shouting, and *keeps* saying it, as he pushes his face against his shoulder.

"I-- of course, you're welcome." Instead of crying, which is what he feels like doing at how the poor kid is obviously falling apart, he pulls him closer, wrapping his arms around him and letting him settle against his side. He's trembling, still laughing, his breathing hitching occasionally. "Do you just need me to hold you for a minute?" He asks, a little hesitant.

He nods, agreeing quietly, and snuggles further into his side. He shifts his shoulder to allow him to get as close as possible-- he's too warm, a fever again?

For a few minutes, the morning quiet settles into place as he holds his son close. Phil's thoughts drift back towards Techno, and whatever was happening outside, but...

No, this is more important, as much as it hurts to not go after him. Tommy's obviously *breaking* right now, it's obvious in his trembling and hysterical giggling and how he clings to his back, hands curled into fists in his shirt.

He kisses his forehead and pushes back his hair. It's damp with sweat, which helps him feel less concerned about a fever, but he's still trembling so hard and breathing so unevenly. Poor thing.

He glances over the room; nothing was broken in the commotion, thankfully, Techno would be very upset, but there's shards of broken porcelain across the floor, a chair is overturned, and blood marks the floor.

Something else white sticks out against the neat spruce flooring. His brows furrow. "Did you knock one of his teeth out?"

Tommy giggles again. Phil feels an absolutely overwhelming kind of pride. "Yeah. He showed me

what was happening outside, and I was just so *mad*--” He pauses. A tremor goes through him and he wishes he could somehow pull him closer, keep him *safe* . “Did *you* see what was happening outside?”

Phil swallows anxiety, rage, despair. They all taste familiar, bitter as coated medicine. “Yeah,” he feels him flinch against his side at his tone, “I did.”

The potion. Techno’s eyes, flashing with pain. The hands in his hair-- god, he must be so overwhelmed right now, he hates people touching his hair. You would guess a man so violent wouldn’t be so vulnerable to someone pulling his hair, but they learned long ago that it hurts him to the point of pacifying him.

(“You could just cut it short,” he offered, watching as Techno brushed out his hair. “I’ll do it for you.”)

“I don’t *want* to cut it short,” he ran the brush through a tangle and grimaced. “I’ll just end anyone who touches it. Easy fix.”)

“What were they doing?” Tommy raises his face a little, and he can see how worried his eyes are, brows furrowed deeply. “Techno was all bloody, and-- Tubbo looked so... wrong...” His voice breaks and he tries to get in closer, fingers digging into his feathers as he grips at his back. He doesn’t even flinch; it’s far from the first time.

He’s seen Techno be arrested *so* many times. Living like he does, doing what *they’ve* done, they’ve had their run-ins with the law. It’s almost familiar.

Nothing like that has ever made him feel so *helpless* , just looking at him. It makes his stomach curl.

*Something* tells him this isn’t a simple arrest to drag him to prison.

(“What did they do to you?”)

A shaky sigh. Eyes too wise for an eighteen-year-old face closing. Scarred hands and wrists held against his chest.

“I really don’t think you want to know, Philza.”)

“Are we going to have to go after Techno?” His voice is defeated, like he expects the inevitable ‘yes’.

Phil swallows again. This time, it’s all guilt, blood-salty. “Maybe,” he sighs out. Tommy looks up at him, surprise registering on his face.

*Guilt.*

“It depends on you, really. You’re hurt, and I’m sure Dream being so rough with you wasn’t good for your lungs.” He looks at the cut and blossoming bruise along his cheekbone, how his chest heaves with his uneven breathing, the spot of blood on his lip. The cuts around his wrist that are borderline clawmarks. How he’s holding one shoulder a little awkwardly.

It doesn’t surprise him when he opens his mouth to talk, and instead promptly begins to cough, hiding it in his arm. He settles a hand on his back, just above his wings, and rubs gently.

“So... until you’re better, I’ll stay here. Techno... he’ll find his way out of whatever happened,

I'm sure." *Hopefully. God, please, let him get out of this.* "I'm staying with you, Tommy."

Through the coughs, he thinks he might hear another giggle.

-

"So... does it hurt?" Niki asks, throwing her bag over her shoulder and holds a hand out to help Techno back to his feet. "The rot, I mean."

If he had the energy, he'd laugh. He settles for a pale smile as they start walking. (He can feel a scrape along his jaw sting as his face moves.)

"Yeah, it hurts. Have you, uh, ever gotten a chemical burn?" He pulls his cloak around his shoulders clumsily; as the spike of adrenaline from being yanked from the brink of death drains slowly, so does his ability to use his damaged body, but especially his hands, which are steadily going numb.

"Oh yeah," she nods, touching her hair and drawing a lock of it around her finger. "Does it feel like that?"

"Kind of. It's like, take the pain of a chemical burn, and put it on the edges of a wound that's already hurtin' you..." he winces when he brings his arms down from where he secured the clasp at the front of his cloak-- it pulls at his wound more than he expected, and it aches down to his broken bones. "It's pretty miserable, I'm not gonna lie."

Niki laughs, the sound comforting in a way that he can't explain. It draws another weak smile from him. "I would think so. I have no clue how you're still on your feet, you look like you're about to pass out." Her eyes dart to his bandages and she smiles, showing off her teeth. She has fangs; he's never noticed, but they suit her. "Or die, I don't know."

He musters the energy to smirk, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "Technoblade never dies."

She returns the glance with her eyebrows raised. "Uh-huh." Her expression is disbelieving but incredibly amused. "Never."

Techno fiddles with his braces absentmindedly. Dried blood flakes off of them and he winces out of disgust. *Gross.* You'd think he'd be used to it by now, but he isn't. It's dry in most places, but along the back of his left palm and wrist, it's still tacky.

"...I used a totem of undying," he admits very quietly, pulling at the laces as much as he can with his weakening fingers. "That's why I'm not... y'know."

"Oh." Her voice is weaker than usual. He can see her hand tighten around the strap of her bag, and the shimmering feathers of her wings ruffle, the sound soft. "That... explains it. When I saw the anvil fall on you, I could have sworn you were dead. I just thought the message didn't show." She pauses, walking slightly slower. He slows himself as well. "Was that why your eyes and mouth had that glow...?"

He pulls at his laces as hard as possible, pressing his tongue against the back of his teeth. His fingers begin to tremble. "Yeah, the totem... does that." He should know. "I thought I died there, too."

He raises his hand to his chest, not to the neatly wrapped wound underneath his cloak, but instead to the small but stark burn on his chest, from the totem tearing itself from where it was settled



against his chest. It's always such a small wound for such a strong form of magic. It even fades with time; the few other totem scars he has have disappeared. So have Phil's, and he's done it so many more times.

He presses his fingers against the burn. It stings with pain throughout his chest, spreading out like vines over his torso, but he can barely feel it in his fingers. "I... I see why I was warned against using it," his voice comes out soft.

("Techno-- oh god, what happened?" Phil's hands gripped around his shoulders. His loose hair falling around his face, hat discarded, dust and blood discoloring his clothes.

His head lolling to his shoulder as he stared at him through his eyelashes. "I... I don't know what...")

He suddenly feels very, *very* small. Like a literally-withering child. Or like when he was stabbed. Or after the ruins.

Every time he's avoided death just seems like it's piling on top of him, and his shoulders slump under the weight of it.

Niki gently rests her hand on Techno's arm, just for a moment. It's warm and jolts him back into reality, and he pretends his chest doesn't twist a little when he brushes her away. "I'm sorry," she murmurs.

His chest feels tight and so does his throat. He swallows. He feels like he's going to cry, but he refuses to cry in front of Niki. She's nice, he is begrudgingly trusting her right now, but he hasn't cried in front of anyone but Phil and Tommy in so long.

He crosses his arms. He's a bit cold, without his shirt; it had been uselessly soaked through with blood and torn to pieces from the anvil. He hasn't been out of the house without a shirt on in years. Which is funny, considering how much he had to pay for the body he wanted.

He brushes his fingers over the bandages. His scars might be all fucked up after this, but that's fine; he prefers his battle scars to those anyway.

"So," Niki says, not light but far more casual than before. "Do you have any idea how to get home from here?"

Techno glances over at her, still absently running his fingers along the bandages. They're really rough, and it's distracting. "Not really. Haven't been back since I settled down out there."

She opens her mouth to offer some bit of knowledge, and who knows, he'd probably listen in this state, but behind them, he can hear footsteps.

Running footsteps.

He doesn't hesitate in turning sharply, reaching to his belt for his sword, stepping in front of Niki, who's drawn a knife, her wings spread out behind them with an audible swish of wind. There's no sword, of course; it's likely still laying in the snow underneath the trees.

He wants to whine from displeasure. He *can* fight with his hands, but he'd rather not; he doesn't think he could land a solid punch like this, and kicking is entirely out of the way with how unstable and heavy he feels from bloodloss and the slowly approaching adrenaline/potion crash. Not to mention how much fighting would tear open his wounds, desperately trying to heal.

And he's beginning to feel entirely overwhelmed, the adrenaline turning into a low, buzzing sensory overload underneath all the pain and the fuzziness from the lingering weakness. (He remembers why he stopped taking potions.)

A tall figure approaches them, all black and white, with faintly glowing eyes in the gloom of the trees. A golden crown glints as they run up.

"Ranboo!" Niki says, her voice full of relief. "How did you get out here?"

Techno growls at the sight of the tall teenager, stepping even further in front of his friend. Sure, he can't fight, but the lake isn't too far away. Worst comes to worst, he'll chase the kid into it.

(No, he knows he won't. He won't use another hybrid's natural disadvantages against him; it's against his morals, skewed as they are. People did that to him when he was younger, and it leaves a mark.

He killed several people for pulling his tail and ears in fights. He doesn't let many people touch them anymore.)

Ranboo stops in front of them, his breathing heavy as he tries to catch it, his gloved hand resting on his chest. "Oh, I'm not meant to run that fast," he gasps between pants for breath, "Not at all, ow." He's out of the armor he was wearing earlier in the day, back in his ridiculous suit, complete with that red tie and an eye of ender sparkling on his lapel.

He catches his breath after a tense moment, running a hand through his mismatched bangs. "Hello."

Techno observes him warily, eyes darting over his ridiculously lanky form. He had a hand in his capture, if only a small one. He's not as at fault as the other three, who either held him in place or drugged him or ran the whole operation with a smile, like Tubbo did. They were objectively worse, but Ranboo was still there and okay with it, after he had (admittedly hesitantly) trusted him in his home.

~~You'd think he'd stop feeling some level of betrayal after so many times.~~

"Hey, Ranboo," Niki acknowledges again, pushing Techno's arm away and stepping forward. She's smiling, her eyes soft as she looks up at him. "Did you follow us?"

"Yeah, I saw you leaving," he admits, his tail wrapping around his waist. It's tipped with snow-white fur that stands out harshly against his black suit jacket, and the movements catch Techno's eyes without even trying. It's stupid. "I, um... I wanted to help."

"I don't need your help," he mutters, his whole body feeling tense. His ribs are aching, though he's sure he's not feeling the full extent of his wounds. Niki said she thought there was internal damage, but he can't feel any of that yet. So he knows it has to be worse than he's feeling.

He's just so tired and overwhelmed. Everything feels like a lot in a way it hasn't in a long time.

"I know you don't," Ranboo agrees in a distracted voice. "You probably, um, really hate me? And that's fair, 'cause I did... help them capture you. For the record, I really didn't want to execute you? I mean, I wasn't here for what you did, and you seem... nice enough. You're nice to Tommy, at least, and that's good, 'cause he's obviously... been through a lot."

As he rambles, he pulls at his gloves, fiddling with the buttons. He doesn't make eye contact, though that makes sense. "And you've only been nice to me so far. I have no reason to want you

*dead*. So I didn't want to do any of that. I'm, uh... I'm really aware of the fact that I'm a bit of a... pushover? Haha..."

He narrows his eyes at him and snorts disapprovingly. (He's been making a lot of piglin noises today. Human language is just so *limited* in its noises of derision.) "Get to the point."

"Right! Um, okay, it's just-- I remember the way to your house, that's all. I don't know if you do, and they said you haven't been here in a while, so I wanted to help you get home." He clasps his hands in front of himself, leaning down slightly to see them better. His eyes are wide and sincere with meaning.

But he always looks like that. Stupid earnest kid. Techno hates the tiny spark of fondness that lights in his chest at the sight of his face, reminding him all too much of Tommy ~~and himself~~.

Niki laughs softly, a little nervously but generally still sweet. "I don't know if that's not a good idea, Ranboo. All your wandering around... haven't they been watching you a lot, lately? We don't need to put Techno in any more trouble..."

He crosses his arms over his bare chest, the pressure on his wound making his vision go fuzzy. "Give Niki the coordinates and go away." Are his words slurred? He can't tell. Everything feels like it's going too fast. "I don't want your help."

He can't crash now. He has to get home. It isn't safe here.

*Get home!*  
*Let Dadza help you*  
*Hugs and sleep*  
*Gapples!!*

"Oh-- yeah, I could do that," Ranboo's voice is small, and he fiddles with his tail, fingers twirling in the fur. "But I don't remember them. I just know the way because I've walked it so many times." His shoulders hunch a little and his long, furred ears droop. "I know you must be angry, I don't blame you. But I really... really want to help. To, um, make up for what I did."

His vision is blurry.

He feels so patently *awful*, something about the situation and the totem and the potions and the emotions are all making him feel like he's spiraling, falling, tripping off some awful tall cliff, colliding with the ground and breaking into thousands of little pieces.

There's a hole in his ribs and an odd ache in his heart and he touched his own *bones* earlier and he's sure the rot is growing, eating up the edges of the wound...

(He doesn't know what will happen if it grows too much. He's never let it get that bad.

He's never let it get that bad.

He knows he's still *alive*, he can feel his heartbeat and his ragged breathing and the blood rushing through his veins, but what if he dies and the rot is his end? What if because of this, he becomes some sort of empty-headed, shambling zombie, ripped clean of all his strength and intellect and carefully gathered knowledge?

Oh god, that sounds worse than anything else he's been through. Worse than his childhood, worse than his darkest days in the Nether, worse than the ruins, worse than Phil leaving, worse than Wilbur calling him a monster, worse than--)

“Techno!” Niki shakes his arm gently, her hand clasped around him. Ranboo is on his other side, hands hovering near him, a quiet little worried chirp leaving his mouth. “What’s wrong? You got so still, and you were breathing so heavy... is your wound hurting you?”

Techno brushes her away and wraps his arms around himself, tugging his cloak in closer. His eyes feel hot with unshed tears and he’s shaking all over, barely able to hold himself together.

God, this is awful. He’s sure he deserves this, he *knows* he’s not a good person, he knows he’s done so much wrong, but this situation is so awful and nightmarish.

(Despite the heavy dose of weakness, Techno had fought like hell the entire trip to L’manberg.

“Quit it,” Quackity snaps, smacking his straining hands. “You’re not getting out of those.”

His hands were almost useless by then, fingertips tingling, the entire side of his left arm completely numb. But he’s nothing if not stubborn, so he keeps struggling. “Are you sure?” he asked, thick with the potion but still sarcastic. “They don’t really suit my outfit.”

Before he could brace himself, Fundy smacked him with the hilt of his sword, square in his stomach. He gasped out and curled forwards, trying to protect his vulnerable middle.

Just as quick, his hair was seized and he was yanked up into a standing position. He wanted to whine from pain. “Stop fighting,” Quackity told him, digging his hand further into his hair and yanking at his scalp. “It’ll be easier like that.”)

He presses his hand over his bandages. He can almost feel the *rot* spreading, but he’s sure he’s imagining that. “I’m fine,” he says, more gruff than usual. His whole body feels like it’s buzzing, and his vision is worse than usual, barely able to focus at all. His hands ache and can’t keep from shaking, entirely numb from mid-forearm to fingers. He’s in so much pain that it’s all starting to blur together.

He’s so overwhelmed that he wants to start sobbing.

He takes a deep breath. He closes his eyes. “Ranboo.”

“Yeah?”

“I need your help getting home.” His voice cracks and he covers his mouth.

He can see his quick nod out of the corner of his eye. “I can do that.”

He tries to force himself to calm down. Empty, calm, neutral. He’s not going to break here. He just needs to keep himself in one piece for a few hours.

When he gets home, he’s giving himself permission to break down when he needs it. *Because I almost died*, he justifies. The voices titter with agreement.

“I can’t come with you,” Niki says, still holding his arm. “I need to get home before nighttime, and it’s a pretty long trip...”

Techno nods. “Thank you,” he says, looking away from her earnest, worried face. “I... I’d probably be dead somewhere, if it wasn’t for you.”

She smiles, he can see it out of the corner of his eye. “You’re welcome.” She squeezes his arm. “Can I give you a hug?”

He hesitantly lets her give him a quick embrace. She's warm. Her hair smells like strawberries and cream, and it's so much better than the blood, which is all he's been able to smell all day on account of the nosebleed he got when all this started. Her sweater is soft against his bare arms, and her wings curl forward to brush his arms and back.

"Take care, Technoblade," she says, giving him a gentle squeeze (mindful of the wound) and stepping back. "You have a comm, right? Message me when you get home, so I know you're safe."

His face flushes despite how exhausted he is. "Yeah."

She adjusts her bag on her shoulder, gives the pair of hybrids a soft smile, and turns back down the path.

Techno turns sharply and starts walking. Ranboo follows with quick steps. "It's kind of a long walk," he says quietly, as if he's not sure he should be talking. "I have to take a long path so I can avoid water."

"I don't care," he says, equally quiet. "I just want to go home."

-

"I'm burning his stupid axe," Tommy announces with glee, picking up the abandoned weapon and inspecting its surface with wild eyes. "Maybe all his other stuff, too. Ohhh, this is fucking great." He grins, only slightly manic.

His shoulders aches enough that holding the axe is painful; it was very nearly dislocated. The bloody marks on his arm have been cleaned and wrapped up, but they still sting when he moves it. His lungs feel raw from coughing (which sucks because he was getting better in that regard) and he feels like he might have a fever again. Where Dream grabbed his bad wing aches to the point of nausea.

He doesn't care. The incredible rush of happiness and hysteria that he got from seeing Dream's dead body is unexplainable. His whole body feels like it's full of sunlight, hot and bright and painful, and he's been shaking all morning. It feels like electricity.

"Don't burn all of it," Phil advises from the kitchen, where he's making breakfast for them. It's not even close to noon, but he feels like he's been awake for months. "I'm sure some of it will be useful." He pauses, thinking briefly, tapping the counter. "Burn that damn axe, though. You've earned it."

"Hell yeah!"

He throws the axe into the fire, watching the flames crowd around it, before going back to the pile of Dream's things, next to the bloodstain. They'll have to scrub that out before Techno gets back, because he'll be very upset about it. He understands, though; he'd be very annoyed if someone killed a guy on his living room floor and then didn't clean up the resulting bloodstain.

"What kind of self-confident bastard carries a bunch of emeralds and shit around with him?" He asks, picking up the neatly cut gems and turning them over in his hands. "Like, he came here to kidnap me. Why the fuck did he have emeralds? Did he stop to do some light trading on the way?"

Phil laughs, the sound enough to make him grin, and sets plates down with a very light clatter. "I don't know. Put them up though, we've actually got use for them."

"Yeah, sure," Tommy nods, setting them aside carefully. He's surprised by the display of wealth in

Dream's items; the motherfucker was carrying *so* many precious materials with him. Not just raw, either, he had a whole satchel full of golden jewelry. He sets it aside with the aims of putting it in Techno's collection, he's sure it'll make him happy.

He picks up a book from the pile of things. A journal, maybe, with nothing on it's plain cover but the same smiley face that's on Dream's mask. He flips it open to a random page, morbidly curious.

Handwriting that is entirely too normal, in deep blue ink.

*"I don't know how long it will take, but one of these days, I'm sure I will break that kid."*

It's all he sees before he snaps it closed so hard he flinches. His chest hurts.

He carries it to the fire and throws it in. He sits in front of it to watch it burn. The axe is burning slowly, it's handle barely affected and the blade only covered in soot, but the book goes up in seconds, the flames devouring the paper and the leather binding. He stares at it for a long moment, transfixed by the destruction.

"Come on, food's ready," Phil calls. Like this, there's little sign of the vicious warrior who killed a man without so much as flinching. Now, he just looks... normal. A tired father making breakfast for his son, still in his pajamas, eyes lined with exhaustion but with a light smile on his face. He's always been able to go between those extremes so quickly.

*("You get your goddamn hands off my son,"* Phil grabbed the other man by the wrist and shoved him back, almost effortlessly sweeping the three of them behind him.

"Wil, are you okay?" Tommy asked, worried by his older brother's bloodied nose.

He dabbed at the blood with the sleeve of his shirt. "Uh, I think so. He only got me with his elbow." He tilted his head back, aiming to stop the bleeding.

"Don't do that," Techno warned. "You'll choke. Lean forward instead."

The two older men finish their whispered conversation, the stranger who took Wilbur for a thief looking shaken and Phil looking furious, yet pleased with himself.

He turned around to his sons, and they only saw the former expression for a moment, before it collapsed into concern.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left you alone for so long here," he worried, voice getting soft as he pulled a cloth from his pocket and got to work cleaning the blood from Wilbur's face. "Let's get what we came here for and go home, yeah?")

Today is a *weird* fucking day, but aren't they all?

Tommy gets up from the floor and goes to the table. He sits in the same chair he always does-- closest to his bed, farthest from the door-- and rests his chin on his hand. "What do you think happened to Techno? Why were they taking him away like that?"

The blood didn't really surprise him, when he saw the scene outside. Techno being bloody is as natural as anything else. It had been just how rough everyone was being with his older brother, even Tubbo; it felt so wrong, almost gratuitous, a group of armored men taking on someone in nothing but simple clothing...

“It looked like he was being arrested... I knew it’d happen eventually, he has a habit of getting himself into that kind of thing, but I didn’t think it would happen here. Figured he’d wander off like he does sometimes and they’d find him, but...”

As he talks, Phil sets a plate down in front of him and kisses the top of his head. It makes him feel like a kid again, and he grins despite himself. (Sue him, he likes affection and undivided attention, even when they’re talking about the *favorite* .) “I think he’s fine, though. I checked the comms, he hasn’t died, and he’s *more* than capable of getting himself out of prison.”

Tommy shrugs, grabbing a fork and taking a bite of his eggs. He isn’t really hungry, but he knows he needs to eat. It’s an everyday struggle. “That’s good. I just... he was all bloody, and that potion, and...” He shudders at the memory of the sight, feeling very exposed and cold in his borrowed pajamas.

Even slightly distanced from the commotion and wrapped up in his own horrible situation, he can remember the fear he saw in Techno’s eyes, wide and almost luminous. The malicious grin on Tubbo’s face as he poured the potion into his mouth, the liquid bright in the sunrise. Quackity holding a handful of Techno’s hair, leather glove entangled in the strands, axe resting against his side. Fundy hovering with his own weapon in hand, having handed off the poison. Ranboo, off to the side, looking lost.

All his friends, seeming to be united in the goal of taking Technoblade down. Did they even know Tommy was there? Would they care, if they did? What has Dream been telling them about where he is? Ranboo knows the truth, but he was sworn to secrecy, under threat of Techno’s retribution.

He reaches up to his chest to touch his compass, running a finger over the inscription on it’s side. He rarely removes it; he even wears it to bed. It’s part of him by now, so accepted he often forgets its there.

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” Phil assures him with complete confidence, sitting across from him. “Techno’s gotten himself out of worse situations before.”

--

Techno hasn’t felt this much pain in years. Possibly ever, actually. He’d try to deduce when he could have felt worse, if his brain didn’t feel like someone had scooped out part of it and replaced it with lava. He has a horrible headache, and the fact that the voices are screaming insults (and have been since the execution) doesn’t help.

They’re finally in the snow, though. That’s good, that means they aren’t all too far away from his cabin. The cold air feels good against his overly warm skin. He feels like he might be running a fever, likely from the potions, but it’s been so long that he can’t really remember how it feels. He’ll ask when he gets home.

“Not far now,” Ranboo comments lightly. “How are you feeling?”

He gives a dismissive huff. It’s not as angry as he’d hoped for. “It hurts,” he says flatly. Breathing is starting to feel like an ordeal. He wonders just *how* broken his ribs are.

“That... makes sense,” he nods, obviously nervous. Usually, Techno would feel proud of the fear he inspires, but he’s too tired to care right now. He doesn’t feel very terrifying at the moment, anyway. Mostly, he feels tired and kind of gross. “Y’know, they intended for the anvil to fall on your head and crush you to death.”

“Really.”

“Yeah! So... um. It could be much worse!”

“That helps, Ranboo. Absolutely.”

The teenager gives him a bright smile, before seeming to realize he’s being sarcastic. His expression falls. “Oh, um... is there anything I can do to help?” He fiddles with his tail again. “Probably not, I don’t have any potions or anything, but--”

“Unless you know how to stop my body from slowly rottin’ away, no.” Ranboo flinches minutely at the words. He feels a flicker of happiness at how dry he can be even though he’s literally falling apart. “How much further?”

His legs feel like lead. He got up entirely too early for this. Couldn’t they have scheduled this execution better? They would have had to get up incredibly early to arrive just after dawn.

~~He’s still on the verge of tears.~~

“Um...” Ranboo steps over a moderately tall snowbank, making a small annoyed noise when his legs brush the wet snow. “Not far? Maybe about another half hour or so of walking.” He tucks his hands into his pockets. “I should’ve grabbed my coat.”

*At least you have a shirt*, he thinks. He’s completely sure that if it wasn’t for his genetics, he’d be frozen to the core by now. He tugs his cloak in closer to his body.

He wonders how things are going back in the cabin. Surely, they drove Dream away. Maybe even killed him. Whatever wounds that were sustained have been cleaned and bandaged. Tommy is crying, likely, but Tommy cries a lot.

*But what if they didn’t drive him away?* He’s not sure where the thought comes from, but it makes him feel colder. *What if Dream took Tommy away again? What if he killed Phil?*

He swallows. That can’t be the case. He’d be able to *feel* it if Phil died, it’s just not possible for him to *not*. And besides, he carries a totem as well, he’s not stupid. He’s still alive. And Tommy is still at home, probably laying in bed, trying to recover from the scare but perfectly okay otherwise. They’re both fine.

~~They have to be. It’s the only thing he can cling to.~~

-

“I should’ve grabbed my coat,” Ranboo says, shoving his hands into his suit jacket’s pockets. The cool air bites at his exposed cheeks and the tip of his nose. *And maybe my mask too*, he thinks with a wince.

Techno huffs quietly next to him, but doesn’t otherwise reply. He’s not very talkative in general, he’s noticed; even when he came to visit Tommy and spent a few hours there, he’s never heard more than a few sentences from him. It wouldn’t bother him if the older hybrid didn’t put him so on edge.

Not in a bad way, he can just tell... something’s up with him. He can tell he thinks a lot, just like him. But he seems nice enough. It could just be his injuries right now, though, because he’s remarkably docile.



The guilt he feels for being so *complicit* in the execution is so heavy it drags him down, making his shoulders ache and his tail and ears droop.

Sure, Technoblade can be dangerous, especially from all the things his friends told him about what he's done and his reputation, he's not going to argue with that. But capturing and executing him? Without letting him even say a word in his own defense? All after drugging him to the point of being unable to fight, with that scary-strong weakness potion Fundy made? It felt so wrong.

Techno hasn't been anything but generally polite to him. Sure, he's a bit standoffish and keeps to himself, but he's not mean and hasn't shown any signs of wanting to hurt him, barring how he tried to fight him when they first met.

And that was completely justified, since he did show up out of nowhere at his house.

He let him into his house despite not really trusting him, and he seems so nice to Tommy, which is good to see. He wasn't at all surprised when he learned they're brothers, not with how Techno is so gentle with him and how Tommy looks at him with pure adoration.

He shivers again. He doesn't know how Techno isn't complaining, shirtless and with his pants torn up. He's obviously cold; his nose and cheeks are all red, along with his sound ear. He looks awful, really, with blood-spotted bandages wrapped around his torso, a scrape along his jaw and cheek bloody and edged with rot, one ear similarly ripped...

The guilt gets heavier. He sighs and hugs himself, pressing his arms in close to his body to try and keep warm. The snow on the ground is sinking into his pants, and it's making his skin itch. *Oh*, he's going to have blisters. At least he made sure to grab boots instead of his dress shoes...

"Why are you helpin' me?" Techno asks abruptly, arms crossed over his own chest, walking with his eyes on the snow.

Ranboo feels his brows furrow, and he hugs himself. "Oh... well, I really do feel bad about what happened? You've been nice to me, and you've been taking care of Tommy... and he's about the only friend I have anymore."

He winces at the thought of how alone he's become in such a short period of time. He didn't expect such isolation when he got here... "And, uhm. When the anvil hit you, it really looked like it *hurt*, so I felt awful that you'd have to walk all the way home like that... I figured I would help..." His eyes flicker over the scrape on his cheek, his ear, the bandages.

"Gotta say, I don't like your pity." His mouth curls with a light sneer, upper lip curling away from sharp teeth. There's faint blood stains on them-- did he bite someone? Ranboo can't recall, but with how wild he was for a short time, he wouldn't put it past him. It's completely reasonable. "I could've made it home fine."

"I'm sure you could," he agrees. "You seem very capable. I don't pity you... I want to help. Genuinely."

He huffs again, staring at the snow like it personally wronged him. "Why did you help them?"

He cups his elbows and brings his arms in close. He feels small. "I'm not very good at saying no to people. And... I don't know if you noticed, but they're... *scary*. At least to me, they are."

He thinks about Tubbo's uneven footsteps, how the smell of whiskey hangs heavy around him as the days get later, how often he snaps at people. How he slams doors and snarls when he's angry. How the littlest thing makes him cry.

(How he's terrified to tell him that Tommy's not actually missing, because he's fairly sure it will do *something* to him.)

He thinks about Quackity's hitlist. Fundy's craving for acceptance to the point of allowing atrocious things to happen. Threats given *just* casually enough that they have plausible deniability.

("Don't make me push you into the lake, Ranboo."

"Don't look at me like that! It was a joke!")

The hesitation in Niki's face whenever he leaves after visiting her. Her hand wrapped around his arm, her voice soft, "tell me if anything happens, okay?" Her holding him close after he stayed the night and had a nightmare, his head buried in her shoulder, her wings wrapped around him protectively. Her murmurs of "I won't let them hurt you."

They... *technically* help with his memory. They all tell him things that happened, but it gives no sense of comfort; it's... he hesitates to say manipulation, but a bit of *selfishness*, on their part. It often contradicts his memory book, or other things he's written down. Like when they told him he promised to help in the execution. He wouldn't do that; it seemed so grisly...

And it was.

("Are you sure this is... justified?" He asked quietly, leaning down next to Tubbo. "I mean... this seems too violent.")

The president hummed. His eyes are red. "Ranboo, it's only fair, considering his crimes. *He's* violent." He raised his hand to touch the scar across his face.)

"You helped execute me... because of peer pressure?" Techno asks for clarification, brows raised. Something on his expression is strange.

Ranboo leans down, hunching down into his own arms. "...yeah, I guess that's what happened." Shame threatens to drown him at the confession. He's such a fucking pushover. A living doormat, unable to put up the most perfunctory argument--

He laughs abruptly, the sound rough and painful even to his ears. "Alright, I can't fault you for that. Bit hypocritical of me." He kicks a snowy rock out of the way. He doesn't know what that means, but at least he's not angry.

Silence settles again. He fiddles with his gloves and pulls at the buttons on the wrists-- he'll need to fix them soon, since they're getting loose again. Because of his fidgeting, he's sure.

"I don't hate you," Techno says, still looking at the snow. "You're a kid. I'm not in the business of hating teenagers for no reason."

He frowns and looks down at him, brows furrowing. "But you *have* a reason. We just established that I was peer pressured into helping *kill you*."

He chuckles very lowly and uncrosses his arms, fiddling with the leather bracers he's wearing around his wrists. "I mean, yeah. But again, you're a kid; I don't really blame you for giving into pressure." He glances up with a very slight smile, nothing more than a crooked twitch of lips.

His face feels hot and his tail flicks. "Oh, uh-- that's nice, then. And I'm... not scared of you, nor do I want you to die." He smiles weakly, intertwining his fingers. "You seem... friendly." His mouth spreads in an involuntary smile when he laughs again, less rough and more genuine.

“I’m not, but thank you.”

## Chapter End Notes

go drink some water. this is not a request, this is a threat

/lh

i suck at answering comments, though i read all of them and try to reply sometimes! if you have any questions and/or want a higher chance of me replying, i'm very (*disgustingly*, really) active on my tumblr, which is the same username as here :-)

additional note: is there anything else i should tag for this fic? i think what's in the tags now is servicable and covers everything, but im also very, incredibly stupid, so if you think i missed something, please tell me :-)

have a good day!

## so if you figure it out, tell me

### Chapter Notes

this chapter kicked my ass and idk why. why is writing this way. my perfectionism wants me to Not post this but i am going to do it anyway because fuck that guy. i write for me and not that asshole

its so very cold where i live, my whole body is freezing and i can't go outside bc of the snow and i am sad, so i am In The Correct Mood, i suppose. we have a lot of perspectives again, and some!! sad times!!

the timeline and pacing doesn't quite make sense here and that's fine. time isn't real we all know this

title from la jolla by wilbur soot

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By noon, Tommy crashes, quite literally.

He doesn't realize it's happening until it does-- he's sitting in Techno's armchair, trying to read one of his books out of a morbid curiosity of what captivates his attention, when he falls forward and nearly out of the chair. He's lightheaded and suddenly so, very sleepy. His eyes can't seem to stay open.

"Oh," he mumbles to himself. "Alright. Naptime, then." He laughs self-consciously and gets up from the chair, gingerly. He needs to put the book away before he lays down. That's easy, the bookshelf is just a few steps to the left. Easy, it'll take a second.

He steps behind the armchair, walking to the bookshelf. He's a little wobbly, but he makes it, setting the book back in its place (trying not to disrupt Techno's not-organization too much) and then turning towards the bed. The wooden floor feels so hard under his sock feet.

*Okay, Tommy. Walk to your bed and lay down. Also very easy.*

Three steps in, he gets a wave of dizziness and falls to the floor, sprawling out on his stomach. He curses viciously, enough that he even makes himself blush, and drags himself up on a chair.

*What the fuck is up with you, TommyInnit?*

"What happened?" Phil asks, just coming in the door. He had gone outside to check around the house. (He hadn't said it, but Tommy's sure he was looking for any sign of what's happening to Techno.)

"I fell," he mumbles in response, clinging to the chair for stability. "I feel like shit."

"You probably overdid it a little today. You're still not totally healthy..." Phil comes over and takes his arm, carefully supporting him and leading him to bed. "Lay down, you need rest."

He's not about to argue with that; he untucks his blankets and wraps himself up in them, letting his

body be cradled by his nest. Safe, warm. Good.

He brushes his fingers through his hair, familiar. "You have a fever again," he says. "It's been a while since you had one..."

He lets out a deep sigh. "Dream fucks everything up, doesn't he," he mutters, mostly to himself. "I was getting better..."

"I'm sorry I didn't help you sooner," he says, a troubled frown on his face. "I didn't... realize what was going on, I was..." He trails off, his hand stilling in Tommy's hair.

He gives a lazy shrug and leans into his hand. "'s okay. You were worried about Techno." He yawns. "You got him away before he could do anything bad to me. I'm not mad at you." His words are a little slurred, and he's shivering. "Not now, anyway. Lemme think about it."

Phil chuckles and keeps petting him, gentle as ever. "That's fair. You can think about it all you need."

His eyes flutter closed, and he snuggles himself further into the blankets. He feels heavy. "Don't leave," he mumbles.

"Never again. I'm right here."

(When he wakes up a few hours later, he's bounced back to his borderline mania. Phil keeps his reservations about his mood to himself.)

--

Really, Techno's surprised they made it this far without issue.

He recognizes this area, dimly; they're not far from the house at all.

He's getting dizzy. Not from blood loss, probably, but likely because he's crashing, practically falling apart. His thoughts feel thick and barely coherent.

It sucks, if he's being completely honest. He can't feel the pain anymore, he's too cold and heavy with exhaustion and what just might be an actual, genuine sensory overload (goddammit he's too old for this) but he can feel the uncomfortable scrape of the bandages against his wounds, the sensitive skin of his sides and stomach.

"Almost there," Ranboo says, reaching over to touch his arm and try to get his attention. "Please don't pass out, I'm not sure I can carry you."

He snorts halfheartedly and keeps plodding along. The snow is thicker here, and his boots keep catching. He really doesn't want to fall. If he falls, he's not getting up.

"Tell me, how's Tommy been doing?" Ranboo asks a little louder, obviously attempting to keep Techno awake. "I haven't been by in a few days."

He shakes his head lightly. His throat feels dry and talking seems... hard. "He's okay," he says, voice growling. "Been gettin' better. His ankle's mostly healed up, and..." he swallows thickly, trying to voice some of the growl from his voice. "Uh... he's been outside more. He went huntin' with Phil the other day, it made him really happy..."

He nearly trips in the snow, and Ranboo catches him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders to

stabilize him. “That’s good,” he says, genuinely happy. “I wonder if he’ll be awake when we get there. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you.”

He nods idly, leaning into his side in a bid to stay on his feet. “Think he’ll be mad,” he mumbles. “Phil, I mean. Gonna be worried.” His tongue is loose with the exhaustion and thick fog through his thoughts; he’s being very honest. “I keep scarin’ him...”

“I don’t think he’ll be mad at you for getting *arrested*,” Ranboo says kindly. “And if he does, I’ll take all the blame. It *is* partially my fault.” He helps him around a particularly tall snowbank, wincing slightly as his legs brush it. “Ow.”

He yawns so hard his vision swims. “Does the snow hurt you?” He asks, slow and drowsy but full of curiosity.

“Hm? Oh, yeah! It stings more than anything else.” He shrugs and shakes the snow off his pantleg. “It’s not that bad.”

“That sounds painful,” he mumbles, rubbing his eyes with a heavy hand. His chest feels tight, but not with emotion or anything, just the numbed pain.

“It’s really not,” he gives a light laugh. “You’ve got it worse, you start rotting sometimes. I’d rather get blisters from water than do that.”

Techno scrunches up his nose. “Oh, yeah. Th-that’s not good, you’re right.” He was trying to forget that. His wound feels itchy from the rot, and so does his jaw. “Used to that, though.” He almost trips, and clings to the tall teenager’s side.

Ranboo laughs again, holding his shoulders a little more securely to keep him from falling. “I suppose you do get used to stuff like that,” he says, still light. “We’re almost there, don’t worry.”

He nods in acknowledgment, growling along with it. He’s starting not to want to talk; noises are easier. (Vaguely, he’s aware that that is a very bad sign, in terms of where he is emotionally.)

By the time he catches sight of the house, it’s beginning to snow, and his eyes won’t stay open. He’s relying too much on Ranboo to keep on his feet, clinging to his waist, arms wrapped tightly around him. He doesn’t seem to mind, holding him securely against him. He seems more distracted by how the snowflakes fall onto his arms and head.

“Ow, ow,” he mumbles. “That’s not great. Can you try and walk faster?”

He sounds a tiny bit impatient, but Techno supposes that makes sense. He tries to steady his feet and walk more quickly, but he can’t really achieve it very well. He shakes his head lightly against his shoulder. “Sorry,” he mumbles. “Can’t go any faster.”

He’s dragged along, his feet catching in the heavy, wet snow. The falling powder isn’t any more than a few flakes, but it’s so cold.

He supposes he misses some time, distracted by his unbalanced steps and the snow falling onto his exposed ears (cold...) but they’re suddenly at the porch steps.

“Come on,” Ranboo says gently, pulling him by the arm up the stairs. “Just a few more steps. Please don’t pass out on me.”

Techno jolts at the realization his mind had skipped, and he starts clumsily climbing the staircase, clinging to his arm. It’s hard, and he almost falls, but he’s pulled to the door regardless. His feet

feel like lead and his toes are cold, numb. He tries to force his fuzzy brain into focusing.

Ranboo knocks on the door, before just turning the knob and dragging him through.

It doesn't register to either of them that that's probably a bad idea until they're in the living area, both wet with snow and clinging to each other.

He can vaguely hear the drawing of a sword, footsteps. He regards these sounds with idle curiosity.

"You have a few seconds to tell me what the hell you're doing here." Philza's voice is all icy, sharp like steel. He kind of likes the sound.

"Uh," Ranboo's voice is much higher than usual, and his back is very stiff. "I brought Techno home...?"

"Hellooo," Techno mumbles, waving a weak hand. "I'm back." He pries his eyes open, and observes (with the same idle curiosity) at how Phil had a sword leveled at Ranboo's throat. "Don't kill him," he adds.

"Fuck," Phil's voice is soft but heavy with meaning, and he snaps out of his anger to lower his sword and turn to him, inspecting his wounded son. "What happened to you, mate? Your *face*-- "

"I got executed," Techno says abruptly. His words are slurred, but his mind is clearing up. "Dropped an anvil on me."

He blinks. "I see." No softness, now. "Alright, that's-- we'll deal with that later. You're obviously feeling horrible, sit down-- how long did you have to walk?"

He's tugged to the table, where he's promptly sat down and stripped of his cloak. He's too out of it to argue, cold and tired as he is. He feels vaguely like he's floating, barely tethered to reality, no matter how hard he tries to focus his thoughts.

"Like... three and a half hours," Ranboo informs shakily. "It would've been quicker if we went by water, but..."

Phil nods, distracted from his anger, as he inspects the scrapes along Techno's cheek and jaw. "It'd be too much to hope that your face is the only rot, huh?"

He nods, leaning into his hand. "Ribs, too. Broken, some of 'em, and..." he yawns and then flinches as something *pinches* inside of him. "Rottin' pretty bad, around where it happened."

"I don't know how you haven't gone into shock yet," Ranboo murmurs. "You... I can tell how much pain you're in..."

"I'm used to it," he mumbles, leaning forward to rest his head against Phil's chest as he looks over his torn ear. "Not the first time this's happened to me, kid." He closes his eyes, comforted by the fact that he's home and safe. He doesn't have to be nearly as on guard now; he trusts Phil to keep him safe.

The tension begins to bleed out of his shoulders.

"First time in a while, though," Phil adds quietly. "Tommy, come over here. I think I'm going to need your help."

Tommy comes over, apprehension on his face. He doesn't seem to know where to look-- the rot on his face, his wild hair, how he's all but sinking into their father's arms like a tired child. "Yeah. What can I do?"

"Just... make sure he doesn't fall. I have to go down and grab some potions. I really hope this'll still work the same way it did before..." He steps back, and against himself, against all desire to seem mature and strong, Techno whines lowly and tries to grab his arm, to pull him back. "Tech, I'll give you a hug when you're no longer *rotting* , alright?"

"Come back," he mumbles, eyes fluttering open just enough to see his worried expression. "Didn't walk for three hours to get home and not get a hug."

"I'll give you a hug," Tommy offers. That seems like an acceptable deal, so Techno allows himself to be tugged into his arms. "Oh, you're... really hot. More than usual."

He shrugs. "S' fine. I feel it, but it's fine."

He pushes back his hair, mindful of the tangled state, and looks his face over. "Dude, you look *awful* ."

He blinks, laughing almost silently. "I've had a rough day..." *And I used a totem of undying, who knows what that did to me in this state.* "I've had too many potions..." He brushes his fingers over the bandages around his torso. Most of them have at least a little blood seeping through. "Suppose I'll sleep pretty well after all of this is over. Might not wake up for days..."

"...that's not a good thing," Tommy says, a nervous grin on his face. He looks just as tired as he is, and his face is flushed. "What did they give you? When they were taking you away, I mean..."

"I know it was weakness, but... whatever else is anyone's guess," he yawns again, not even having the energy to flinch when his insides flare with pain. (It's probably not good that he's starting to go numb to it.) "I'm still kind of feelin' it."

"This is a bad time to tell you that you need to drink another, isn't it?" Phil says, on the very edge of being casual. He sets a few supplies out on the table. "Hopefully it still works on you. I told you more than once, using as many potions as you have--"

"--is *detrimental to my future* , yeah, I remember," Techno opens his eyes just to roll them, taking the offered potion. "I think it'll still work."

"Again, *hopefully*. Eat this, too." He hands over a golden apple, which manages to make him sit up, eyes going wide.

Between how actually *hungry* he is and the fact that he knows it'll help, he's ridiculously excited.

He sinks his teeth into the gilded fruit and lets out a low, happy growl, leaning back in his chair. God, it's never tasted or felt better, the rush of regeneration magic and the sweet metallic taste of both the apple and the gold...

"...never seen him that happy," Ranboo says quietly to Tommy.

He doesn't bother to crack his eyes open and glare at them, taking another bite. He doesn't even want to drink the potion; this feels like it'll fix everything, will chase the pain and the rot and the fuzzy feeling of despair he's had all day.

But he knows how this works. Reluctantly, he drinks down the overly-sweet potion. For some



reason, it makes the tiniest bit of that panicky despair rise in his stomach, as the weakness makes him slump down in his chair, sinking against Tommy's shoulder for stability and ~~why not admit it?~~ safety.

(He was literally drugged earlier that day, so. That might explain it.)

( *don't rest don't rest not safe not even here Dream butchers potions danger danger danger* )

"I remember why I stopped takin' potions so much," he mumbles, placing the empty bottle on the table. "I can feel myself crashin'." He's trembling, the usual affect of the method, but it's never any less scary.

"I can see it happening," Phil agrees. He's taking his braces off his unoccupied hand, and washing the blood off his skin. "Who patched you up? I know you don't carry bandages, and I'd guess they took everything you had."

He takes another bite of his apple, offering his other hand to be cleaned. "Niki helped me," he says, a little too softly. After a moment's hesitation, he adds in a shaking voice, "she said we're friends."

"That's nice of her," he says, setting his braces aside to be cleaned up later, and moving onto the bandages around his chest. "Did she help you get out?"

He nods, forcing his eyes to stay open. He doesn't want to fall asleep and have to be carried to bed; he's not sure any of them are strong enough to move him. "She was really helpful... she said she wants to take down L'manberg, which is nice," he hums, smiling weakly. "Maybe I'll help her..."

The kids both laugh next to him. Phil smiles, but there's deep concern in the tilt of his brows. "I'm sure she'll appreciate the help." He pulls away the bandages, and seemingly can't help but make a noise of despair. "Shit. That's *bad*."

Techno glances down at the rotting-edged wound. Horror goes through him at the sight.

The rot has retreated slightly, the green much less spread out, but now he can see all the bloodied flesh and torn muscle and the white glint of broken bones.

It breaks him a little. He swallows a heartbroken sob, raising a hand to grip at his father's arm. His weak hand is trembling.

"It's okay," he says quietly, resting a hand on his undamaged shoulder and rubbing at his collarbone with his thumb. "I can help, okay? I've done it before, and you've always been fine."

His eyes feel hot with tears and he stares at his wound. "I-I didn't realize it was that bad..."

"Well, someone dropped an *anvil* on you, Tech, it's going to be bad," he raises his hand to pet back his hair briefly. "I'll get you cleaned up, and then you can sleep for a bit. You look exhausted."

He nods slowly, slowly letting go of his arm and instead fiddling with a fraying thread on his pants. "I need a bath..." he mumbles. "...n my hair's all messed up..." his eyes close and he feels vaguely flustered when tears slide down his cheeks, stinging a scrape along his jaw.

"I'll comb your hair before you sleep," he assures softly. "And you can take a bath tomorrow. I think you'd just pass out if you tried now."

He groans, but it's probably true.

Silence settles as he inspects the wound, brows furrowed deeply as he tries to discern the severity. Techno has to look away, something like guilt climbing up his throat.

“Well... it’s not the worst I’ve seen on you,” he says, starting to clean the wound gently. It both hurts and feels amazing, depending on what it touches; it was the same way when Niki cleaned him up. “Though that’s a high bar.”

He nods drowsily. Even this isn’t as bad as his wounds when they first met-- well, *presumably*. He has very little memory of that, past the initial contact with that damned wither skeleton. “At least I’m not withered.”

“Exactly. I don’t think my heart could take it, honestly.” Phil squeezes his shoulder with a very light laugh. “It looks like you were lucky, actually. Your ribs are all fucked up, I think most of them on this side are broken, but it doesn’t look like there’s any major internal damage. No punctured organs or anything.”

“Yay,” he says, tired and thick with tears.

“Why are you rotting, anyway?” Tommy asks, sitting in one of the other chairs and having broken away from an unusually quiet conversation with Ranboo. They both look particularly tense. “That’s... kind of terrifying, if I’m being honest, and you two just seem to be accepting it.”

Techno’s eyes flutter closed and he leans forward on Phil’s shoulder again. “Piglin blood,” he mumbles. “Get really hurt and it starts rottin’. I don’t know how it works.”

“It’s always been like that,” Phil adds. “That’s why I’m not freaking out about it right now.”

“...I think you’re freaking out a *little*,” Tommy laughs, the sound faint. “I am.”

“You’re also in a very fragile state right now,” he counters.

Techno lets the words sit for a moment, before sitting up far too aggressively and looking around. Terror sinks into his stomach and his hands twitch, looking for anything to fight with; sword, axe, knife, bat... “What happened with Dream? This morning, I know I *saw* him...” Pain arcs through his body and he bites down a sob of agony. “He didn’t-- did he hurt you, Tommy?”

“He tried,” Tommy says, voice softer. He seems to become small in an instant, hugging himself loosely. “Phil killed him before he could really do anything.”

The voices scream their approval so loudly that he has to laugh to try and not join them, tears spilling down his cheeks. “Really?” He asks, barely hearing himself over the victorious screeches of his father’s name and various other cheers. At least they’re done insulting him for now.

Phil makes an agreeing sound, grabbing fresh bandages and winding them around his torso. “He deserved it. Don’t even get me started.”

“Oh, that explains that message, then,” Ranboo adds, voice a little faint. “None of us knew who could’ve killed Dream, we haven’t seen him in days, nobody had any idea where he was.” He pauses. “Why was he here, anyway?”

Tommy absentmindedly picks at his wing, ruffling the odd misaligned feather. “No clue,” he says, voice flat. “It’s not important, really. He’s dead and we’re free from his bullshit for a few days.” He gets up from his chair and walks to the bookshelf, his back to them.

Techno smiles softly despite his concern and the buzz of hysteria from the voices, and raises his

better arm to pat Phil's shoulder. "So you've still got it, huh."

"Was it ever in question?" He asks lightly. "Sit *still*, Tech, I need to get these--" Tommy makes a vaguely choking sound. He winces. "Sorry, I... forgot."

"No! No, it's fine, I just-- you weren't even talking to me, ha..." His voice is a few pitches too high. He places a book back on the shelf. "Ranboo, how about we go downstairs? We can go through the chests or something. I... think we should leave them alone."

Ranboo glances between all three of them, playing with the end of his tail again. "...okay," he nods, and follows Tommy down the ladder.

The lightness drains from the room with them, and Techno feels as if he's being scolded before Phil even opens his mouth.

"So. *Executed*, huh." He says, moving on to clean his face. "Mind telling me how you got out of that one?"

He closes his eyes against the cool disapproval on his face. "I used a totem."

"*Technoblade*."

"You and I both know they're safe as long as you're not stupid about them--"

"Every time you use one of those, they take a little bit from you!" Phil snaps back, pulling away and briefly curling his hands into fists at his sides. Techno's mouth goes dry at the anger on his face and he has half a mind to cover himself. He's only stopped by his aching wounds and heavy limbs. "And there's not much left of you for it to *take*, Techno. It's not safe for you to do that anymore."

He looks down at his lap again and his tail twitches against the back of the chair. He feels like he's a kid again, getting scolded for starting fights or endangering their home.

"Doesn't that mean it's not safe for you, either?" He asks, folding his arms over his bandaged middle. His vision is blurry, though what from, he still can't tell. Everything feels slow, which means Phil's anger is sinking into him like the world's worst poison. "You've used them more than I have."

(Phil rarely gets angry like that. Not at his sons, at least. He's seen him well and truly enraged, but it's very rarely been directed at him or his brothers. It hurts.)

"I'm well aware that it's dangerous for me, and I haven't needed one in a while," his voice is sharp with anger, and it makes him want to cry, for some odd reason. Today has been one of those days, he supposes. He already gave himself permission to cry, so he lets the tears free, dripping down his face, almost unnoticed. "But-- Techno, you're smarter than this. I don't want you to end up like me. Dying would've been... easier--"

He looks up, eyes wide, blinking quickly to try and banish the tears. The anger flickers inside of him, quickly swallowed by his misery. "Easier?" he asks, voice strange and not quite his own. "Forgive me for not wanting a bunch of maniacs to *kill me*, Phil." It's not as biting as he hopes, his words thick with tears and his breathing ragged. "They *drugged* me and dragged me around by my *hair* and tried to *crush* me, I didn't want to give them the *satisfaction* of-- of--"

He chokes briefly as it hits him, just how awful the situation is. Sure, he realized it was fucked up, but it settles on him, so heavy it drags him down.

He sinks down in his chair with a low whine and tears begin to trail down his cheeks, stinging his wound and making it hard to breathe.

His ears pin against his head and his tail coils around his leg. Everything hurts and the voices are screaming at him for showing such vulnerability, even in front of someone he trusts.

He feels small and scared and *oh god he can't do this anymore* .

"I know it would be easier," he whispers, voice a little high and hysterical, the edge of a *laugh* in it. "I... you wouldn't have to deal with this, I wouldn't be hurt, I..."

Phil makes a low, worried noise, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Techno, I-- I didn't mean that, I'm sorry." He pulls him into a gentle embrace, hugging him securely against his chest. "It wouldn't have been easier. I shouldn't have..." He trails off.

He tries to swallow around his tears, pushing his face against his shoulder. "I didn't want to *die* , not like that," he whispers, still choked with laughter. "I couldn't even fight, I-I touched my *ribs* , I felt— *helpless*. "

(Every blow they gave him seems to return. Cruel eyes and even crueler hands. Sharp words.

More than one demeaning comment about his nature, which he thought was a little funny, considering the fact that not one person in that little party is human.)

He pets his tangled hair and presses a kiss to the top of his head. "It's okay," he murmurs. "I'm sorry. I-- I thought about going outside, and helping you... but Tommy was in a bad situation too, and I had to help him--"

"You always go after me," he mumbles against his shirt. "And he *knows* that. It's okay."

"I saw it happen, through the window," he continues petting his hair, voice getting weak as he keeps talking. "I saw you try to go for the house, and how they kept pulling you back-- how you screamed for me..." He holds him closer, pressing his face against the top of his head. "God, I'm so sorry."

He clings to his back, throwing all sense of pride out the window as tears continue to flow from his eyes, sobs choking him. He wants to say something, *anything* , but he can't stop crying. He hasn't let himself cry like this in so long.

(It had to be when he learned Wilbur was dead, right? It broke him for a good two days, during which he had done little but cry through all his chores and tasks.

That was a few months ago. Wasn't it? Time seems to stretch so far.)

"It's okay," Phil soothes, kissing his forehead and leaving his lips resting against his skin. "You're home now. You're safe."

Techno whimpers on a sob, or maybe a scream. He crumbles completely, wrapping his arms tightly around Phil and pushing his face further into his shoulder, hiding his misery. Shame fills him up to his head, making him feel like he's drowning.

The voices fall quiet, not insulting anymore, only the occasional murmuring of *it's okay* and *Dadza can take care of you* and *poor, poor Techno...*

"You're okay," he soothes again, scratching the back of his ear gently. His wings are gently draped

around him like a heavy blanket. “Shhh. You’re going to be okay, Techno.”

He sobs and grips onto his shirt, tears soaking into the fabric. Everything feels fuzzy and he’s so tired, so *small* . He just wants to go to bed.

“I wanna go to sleep,” he slurs out through tears, barely intelligible. Talking aches.

“Okay,” Phil murmurs softly. “Let’s get you to bed, then. Do you want to sleep down here, or do you want to go upstairs?”

Being presented with a choice makes his head hurt even worse, but the loft has a distinct advantage; more privacy. And also Marnie.

“Upstairs,” he mumbles.

He’s gently helped to his feet. Vaguely, he recalls being sick as a child, and being led to bed like this. Was it during the winter? It had to be, because that was the only time he ever got sick back then.

He’s not sure how they make it up the ladder, but within moments he’s sat down gently on the edge of his bed, his boots being untied.

His eyes slip closed. *I can rest now* , he informs himself softly. *I’m safe. Very safe* .

He’s tucked under his blankets. He’s never felt more comforted by heavy wool and soft pillows.

“You haven’t had a fever in a long time,” Phil says, running a comb through his hair now. It’s spread out over the pillows and the ends of his bangs, still kind of bloody, tickle his face. It makes him want to laugh.

Techno wants to nod in acknowledgement, but moving sounds like it’s impossible. He just mumbles instead, not even words, barely even human.

“Go to sleep,” he encourages gently, lifting his hair to work out a tangle. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He finds the energy to yawn, pulling his arms close to his chest under the blankets. Something’s not right, though. He manages to crack an eye open.

Marnie is sitting next to the bed, her plush head tilted at him almost disapprovingly. He lets out an incoherent whine and stares at the plush with dismay.

“Hm?” Phil notices his distress, and follows his gaze. “Oh! Yeah, here you go.” He picks Marnie up and hands her over.

Techno summons a monumental amount of effort to raise his arms and grab her, pulling her soft plush body to his chest.

(He’s had this specific plush for... god only *knows* how long. She was a gift from Wilbur, while the older was going through a phase of being “too old” for toys. Techno, who was around ten at the time, had never really had any toys, so he had clung to the fluffy, pink little pig from then on.

And he never really let go of her, to be honest. Even as he got older, she was one of his prized possessions. A comfort item, up there with his crown and his old cape. Just... something that makes him feel as good as he did during his childhood.

Marnie looks as well loved as she is; her fur is a dingy pink no matter how many times he's washed her, one ear had fallen off a few years ago and was sewn back on, and all her stuffing is flattened with age. But she's still one of his favorite things.)

He buries his face between her ears, and hugs her close. Phil rubs a thumb over his temple and goes back to combing his hair.

His sleep is deep and he has a pleasant dream of their old home, their old *life*. The sky is a uniform, sunset pink-orange. Wilbur is playing guitar somewhere, Tommy is chasing butterflies with Tubbo in the grass, and he's resting his head on Phil's lap, as he braids flowers into his hair.

The air smells like azaleas, and everything is good.

--

Tubbo leans back on the edge of his desk, biting into his tongue so hard he can taste blood.

He's so tired. Of course he is, they rose before the sun was even up to ambush Technoblade, but he's feeling a different kind of exhaustion.

Of course, the execution of someone like him couldn't be easy. Couldn't be easy as blocking a teenager into a box and shooting him with fireworks.

He sneers at nothing and sinks into his chair, rubbing his temples. He could use a drink, but really, it's too early. He's not far gone enough that he drinks at-- he glances at the clock blearily-- barely noon. Ugh.

He could take a nap. Any work he has can wait, surely.

In another life, far before now, he would go and hang out with Tommy when he's this tired.

His best friend would immediately notice how exhausted he was, and would talk softer, letting him rest at his side, but making it very obvious that he's there. Or they'd go on a walk, and Tommy would pretend to be annoyed when Tubbo dozed off while walking, and carry the smaller boy home. Or they'd curl up in his bed, listening to music, and take a nap *together*, secure in the knowledge that they trust each other enough to do this.

Hell, even during the revolution, when things were so *complicated*, they carved out time to do stuff like that together-- even if it was just for an hour, they'd sit together on a ledge and just talk quietly, leaning up against each other, holding hands, watching everyone else.

And now Tommy's missing somewhere, hiding out or-- *something*. Dream hasn't given him enough details.

Tubbo misses him so much it *hurts*.

He leans back in his chair, letting it tip slightly, and rubs his eyes now. The sparks of color behind them remind him of the fireworks.

("Tubbo! Hey, I've been looking for you!" Dream's mask for once seems to match his voice, because he seems rather cheerful.

Tubbo forces a smile and turns to the masked figure, jogging lightly down the dock. "Hi, Dream," he offers, hoping the roughness in his voice isn't too obvious. "You've been looking for me? Why?"

Dream comes to a stop in front of him, head tilted. His white mask gleams in the sunlight. This must be a new one— it's not all scuffed up like the old one, the one Tubbo is fairly sure got broken. "I... I think I might have some bad news for you."

His brows raise, and his palms are suddenly damp. He casually brushes them off on his suit jacket. "What kind of bad news?" He asks hesitantly.

Dream has been coming around for a while, seemingly genuine in trying to be friendly. He doesn't know if he trusts it, but he's glad for more company. He's been lonely, as of late, despite how he's surrounded with people most of the time.

"Tommy's missing," Dream says, and something cracks inside of Tubbo, filling his bloodstream with a cold, sticky fear like spilled soda.

"*What?*" His voice is almost shrill, and he curls his hands into fists. "How could he go missing?"

"I don't know," he says, shrugging, all too casual. "I went to see him today, I was even gonna let him come back for a visit, but he just... he's *gone*."

The wording gives Tubbo pause. His tongue feels too dry and he leans back on his heels, suddenly aware he's trembling. "When you say gone... do you mean...?" Before Dream can reply, he laughs nervously and waves a hand. "Surely not, right? He's not— you know..." He chokes briefly and covers his mouth, eyes hot. He doesn't want to cry.

A warm, fingerless-gloved hand settles on his shoulder. He isn't sure he's felt this small in a while. "I don't mean dead," he says firmly. "There's been no message, so he's not dead. He's flown away, or something."

Some of the cold fear inside of him wanes, becoming more like anxiety, which is far more manageable. "That's... that's good," he breathes. His heart is beating too fast. (By the *stars*, he needs a drink.) "I don't know where he'd go, if he ran away... he can't come back here, and everyone he knows is here..." He raises a hand to fidget with one of his ears, rubbing the fur between his fingers. "And he can't leave the server... can he?"

"Nope," Dream says, tucking his hands into his pocket. "It's locked for now. So we at least know he's somewhere around here." He laughs, light, like they're having a normal conversation. Like he didn't just inform Tubbo that his best friend is *missing* with no trace. "I have some places to ask around. I don't want you stressing yourself out doing all the looking."

He nods along, feeling dazed and thirsty. "Yeah, that wouldn't be great..." he rubs his temples, and then runs his hands into his hair to rub at his horns. He has a headache.

(He isn't sure if they're getting bigger or if he's just projecting.)

"I'll tell you if I learn anything, alright?" The older man raises a hand to push his mask up, revealing his mouth enough to see his comforting smile. "I'll find him."

Tubbo feels oddly soothed by the idea. "Thank you, Dream.")

That was almost three weeks ago. Dream hasn't mentioned it since, other than saying he's been *looking*.

*Wouldn't Tommy try to come to me?* Tubbo thinks, staring at the ceiling. Even if he's forbidden from entering the country, he's never known him to follow orders like that. He'd surely try to sneak in and at least tell him that he's okay.

Maybe he's sick? Or hurt? That could explain it. Maybe he's hiding out somewhere, to recover.

If he comes around again, he'll let him back into his life. Of course he will.

He misses him so much. So much that his stomach hurts from it, so much that his eyes well with tears and they pour down his cheeks.

Sighing, he gets up. He needs a drink, the early hour be damned.

--

Ghostbur was in a good mood that morning. In fact, he was well on his way to go and visit his family, where they're all hiding out in the tundra. Because it sounds fun, and he misses them a lot. It's been at least a week since he visited.

But on his way out of L'manberg, humming to himself and enjoying the pale sunlight on his skin and hair and feathers, who did he see but Technoblade? He's being led around by a group of men in armor, for some reason. The only one he can recognize right off is Ranboo, and that's only because the boy is so tall.

Curiosity overtakes planning, and he follows the group at a distance, floating off the ground as to not make a sound. The whole situation feels... strange and a little scary, if he's being honest. Seeing them dragging Techno around like that makes the back of his neck prickle with unfamiliar anxiety. Of course, he has to figure out what's happening. Despite dying, he's still *very* protective of his brothers, and he'd like some answers as to why Tubbo and Fundy, of all people, are involved with dragging him around in handcuffs. It seems pretty rude.

(Ranboo and Quackity... hmm. He's not as surprised. He doesn't trust them.)

He watches warily as they drag him into the plaza, and barricade him into a cage made of iron bars. The situation makes his anxiety rise even higher, and his stomach begins to hurt faintly. Oh, this isn't good.

They're mocking him, too, though he seems unphased. He's just staring at them, a pink eyebrow arched slightly as Quackity viciously insults him. His tail and ears flick mildly, like a slightly amused cat.

"I'm not gonna stoop to your level, so you might as well stop tryin' so hard," he says in a drawl, leaning back on the bars. They've uncuffed his hands, and he crosses his arms casually over his chest. "Get to it. Don't you wanna go on with your day? I know *I* do. I have potatoes to farm. Things to kill. Books to read. You know how it is."

Ghostbur has to suppress a giggle at how unaffected he sounds. *That's* the Techno he remembers.

"I told you, we should have gagged him," Fundy mutters, just loud enough to hear. "He's having way too much fun." The ghost's eyebrows twitch down, and he can't help his soft sigh of disapproval. Why does he sound so into this? Techno is *his* family too.

"Yeah, but then we wouldn't have heard him cry when you hit him," Quackity shrugs. "Or when he dies."

"Yeah, yeah," Techno says, waving a hand in a lazy circle. "Get it over with already. I'm gettin' bored."

More insults are tossed, and some kind of mechanism is revealed. Ghostbur can't see too well from



the ground, but he hears the word *anvil* .

With far too much clarity for how he's felt recently, the truth hits him. They're going to *kill* Technoblade.

His eyes widen, and tears spring to them, cutting down in cheeks in black lines. No! That's-- that's awful, why would they do that? Techno hasn't done anything wrong! He's done nothing to deserve this!

He wants to emerge from his hiding place and take him out of that strange little cage, keep him safe and comfortable under his wings, like he did when they were little. He wants to hold him close and take him home.

But he can't move. It's like he's being held in place, *forced* to watch by his own horror.

The anvil drops. Techno *screams* , pained and loud, and he can hear several, *awful* cracking sounds.

He barely even notices the explosions, how the cabinet members shout at the sight of Punz. He's too transfixed by Techno's bloodied figure, trapped in the now-broken cage, standing stiffly.

Something is wrong with him. A spill of golden light tumbles from his eyes and mouth, glowing brightly in the overcast light. Something golden flashes in the air faintly before seeming to explode into sparks.

He stares as his little brother stumbles out of the hole in the cage, blood dripping down his body from-- some kind of wound. There's blood everywhere, splashed across his face, in his hair, and his eyes are open in a shocked horror.

Ghostbur's nose starts bleeding. He can taste it, dripping into his open mouth. He's remembering something, a *bad* something.

(Techno standing in the doorway, splattered with so much blood that the white button-up he was wearing was completely red.

His hair matted and hanging around his face.

His eyes open so wide he could see the strained vessels in them.

The sword he carried at the time-- a pretty iron blade that he got for his birthday, shiny and enchanted-- broken and chipped, held so tightly his knuckles were white.

Not talking. Not talking for-- four or so months. Mostly just sitting curled up in bed, staring at the wall.)

He starts following him. Of course he does. He wants to help. He even says his name a few times quietly, so he doesn't startle him. He doesn't seem to notice, plodding along with heavy steps. His eyes are unfocused, staring at the ground.

"Techno," he calls, softly. "Come on, look at me. I want to help."

(Is he-- is he invisible again? Completely incorporeal? That's happened a few times when he gets really worked up about things...)

"Hey!" A woman with tied-back blonde hair, dressed in warm-colored clothing with a bag thrown

over her shoulder, runs past him. She's familiar... does he know her? Why does she look so familiar...?

Techno seems to recognize her as well, jolting when she shouts, and turning to her when she stops next to him.

"Technoblade," she breathes, her face flushed with exertion. "I saw what happened. God, I am so *sorry*. I don't know what's wrong with people here—"

"No time," Techno interrupts, and his voice sounds all weird. It makes Ghostbur let out a worried sound and hover near him, touching his shoulder but getting no response. "What do you want?"

Her pretty face gets stony, and she looks away. "I want to help you. You're trying to get out of the country, yeah?"

Techno gives a nod, and she leads him down another path.

Ghostbur follows closely, still off the ground. They exchange words, but he's more focused on how Techno's holding his injured side, with his chest all wrapped in his bloody shirt.

It worries him so much; that memory keeps playing, without proper context or explanation. His own nose is still bleeding, and a few drips come from his mouth as well when he coughs. Oh, this isn't *good*.

The woman— her name is Niki, he hears, and he does remember her, she's the one who runs (ran?) the bakery, he likes her a lot— leads them over a rickety bridge, before sitting Techno down to tend to his wound.

Ghostbur catches his useless breath at the sight; the wound is edged in green, with bits of white showing through all the red gore. It's awful and gross-looking and Techno must be *miserable* from the pain.

He rests his hand on top of his brother's own when his breath catches from pain. Niki is cleaning his wound gently, and she murmurs an apology.

When they leave, he follows. His nosebleed hasn't stopped, because while that one memory is done, seeing Techno in pain brings up *bad feelings*, nasty dark emotions that he doesn't want to confront right now.

(Techno's shining purple eyes, full of tears, as Wilbur— Alivebur, that is— leaned over him, curled up on the floor, spitting venom at him.

His little brother couldn't have been more than fourteen, his hair awry, his cheek bruised, but Wilbur still *insulted* him, calling him a monster, a freak, a pathetic creature.)

In those memories, he's acting so terrible. So *cruel*. No wonder Techno holds him at arms length and looks so uncomfortable around him; he was horrible to him when he was alive! Sure, in those memories, they seemed young, but even Ghostbur knows that childhood events shape your relationships and emotions.

He must have *destroyed* theirs...

He resolves right then and there to fix things. He pulls out a book and starts writing down his horrible memories as he walks, and how he can fix them, before he forgets.

They're bad, but he needs to remember the bad things too. Good memories make him feel like a better person, but he knows he wasn't a good person when he was alive. Everyone hated Alivebur, and for good reason.

He's going to fix things, and he's starting with Technoblade.

Blue blood drips onto the paper.

---

Ranboo sits down next to Tommy and fidgets with his tie. They're in a heavy silence, the air in the basement thick with tension.

Tommy sighs heavily and leans back on a chest, spreading out his wings against it. The broken one still hurts like hell after this morning (was that just this morning? Fuck) and his fever is still firmly in place.

He can't get the sight of Techno's dazed and lost expression as he clings to Phil out of his head, lined right up with the scene outside this morning and Dream dying on the floor.

"Alright." He says, voice stronger than he feels. Ranboo jumps, ears twitching up and tail whipping with alarm. "Tell me what happened with Techno."

"Oh..." his friend trails off. "Well, uh. It was Quackity's idea. The execution part, at least. Tubbo decided we'd capture him. And then... somehow they figured out where he was—I swear I didn't tell, I *promise*—and they decided we'd have to ambush him..." he hunches his shoulders down, attempting to make himself small. He does that a lot. "Fundy made this really, really strong weakness potion. Two of them, actually..."

He brings his long legs up and hugs them, scratching at one idly. "Because, y'know, even with all four of us in full netherite and armed to the teeth, we really can't take Techno in a fight. The only person who's a fair match for him is probably Dream..." Tommy flinches completely involuntarily. "So Fundy said that we could weaken him, and then drag him to L'manberg for the execution..."

He looks up from the floor, looking in Tommy's direction. "I really didn't want to do it," he says, voice shaky. "I told them I didn't think it was necessary, that it was too violent, but they kept telling *me* that I had promised, and that Techno deserved it, and... if I had said no, they would have done something *awful*..." he shudders. "Things are... not good, over there."

Tommy sinks back against the chest, rubbing his eyes. "You should have gotten out of it anyway," he says, not really thinking. "I know you're not good at standing up for yourself, but..."

Ranboo curls up a little smaller, ears drooping. "I know," he whispers. "I really tried. But... they all scare me, and I don't want them being even more angry with me, so I just... I listened. I was *scared*, Tommy."

He presses the heels of his palms against his eyes. "It's... I mean, I don't know if I should, but I trust you. I don't think you'd just *do* something like that. You're... pretty passive." He nods, not even offended. "But what I saw this morning... god. That was fucked up."

"It was," he agrees quietly. "I didn't realize how violent they'd be. It... got bloody really fast." He hugs his legs closer and lets his head droop. "I'm sorry."

He shuffles in a little closer, feeling cold in the dim basement, wanting to be close to someone.

Their legs brush and Ranboo drops one hand to grab his, threading gloved fingers through his own.

Above them, he can hear Techno crying.

This has been the longest day he's ever lived through.

## Chapter End Notes

as always, if you want more snow au content and to see me actively losing my fucking mind, follow me on tumblr and yell with me

this chapter was particularly self indulgent, and im not sorry. this is jaybird's fic and y'all are all just reading it

one more thing: im sorry that i replied to like!!! no comments last chapter!!! i'm very tired and Life Stuff is happening so i don't have the energy to reply to most comments. rest assured that i read and reread every comment i get and they fill me with inappropriate levels of serotonin. i'm going to try and do replies this time around, but please don't feel unappreciated if i don't reply! i love you regardless! \*platonic forehead kis\*

## because they are both holy and free

### Chapter Notes

SURPRISE BITCH. bet you didn't think you'd see me again this soon. if you've been following me on tumblr and seen some of the ramblings i've been doing, you'd know some extra Plot Stuff.

one of those Plot Things is what's going on with dream.

here's a small, quickly written (like. all together it took me an hour and a half lmao) interim chapter about it, while i work on the real chapter 13 :-)

this is. super self indulgent, more so than usual. you have to deal with that.

title from saint bernard by lincoln

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream snaps into awareness, consciousness, whatever you want to call it, as soon as his back meets the floor. The blackness fades and suddenly he's in a real house, a real building, the *real world*.

The pained breath that leaves him is mostly involuntary. His back aches and his clothes are sticky with blood. He's hurt, then. He tastes blood.

*Focus. What's going on? What were you dropped into? What was it doing?*

He blinks hard, forcing the world around him into making sense.

Someone is standing just in front of his sprawled-out form. Large, dark wings are spread out like sails, filling most of his vision, and the owner of those wings is staring down at him with a cold grin on his face, a wickedly sharp sword in his hands.

He should know who this is. Right? Yeah, he should. His face, even full of icy amusement and rage, is familiar. But it won't click. Who is this? Who is he? Fuck.

He does realize that he's in danger, though.

He doesn't think before he tries to get back to his feet. An axe is nearby-- his axe, right?-- and he's already coming up with a vague plan to snatch it up and defend himself.

Or, well, he is until the man leaning over him kicks him down and shoves the blade of his sword underneath his chin. He bites into his tongue at the sharp shock of pain, and he feels the blood dripping down his throat, more than he expected.

"You talk a lot of big game for someone who spends most of his time manipulating kids, mate," he says, and oh he knows *that* voice, that's Philza, oh *fuck*. His blue-green eyes are ice-cold and his smile is almost a sneer. And it's. Wrong. "You couldn't even have the decency to target an adult with your bullshit? Tommy's *sixteen*. Really not a good look for you, Dream."

Someone giggles, high and hysterical. (Tommy?)

“I’m not--” he tries to start, but as soon as he tries to speak, Philza places his foot on his chest, restricting his breathing, and the sword is shoved in further. He chokes, barely able to inhale.

The words that leave his mouth next aren’t his own. It isn’t his voice, either. “I’m not *manipulating* him, I’m just trying to keep him safe and stopping him from hurting anyone--”

*Shut up*, he screams at the goddamn *thing* possessing him. *Shut up, you’re going to get us killed, you fucking idiot!*

“Oh, you’re more deluded than I thought.” Those dark, terrifying wings spread out further, feathers ruffling. When he laughs, it sounds like ice crackling. “He told us what you did. You’re either malicious or stupid, and I don’t know which one’s worse. Not letting him fly, breaking his wing-- with your bare hands, no less.”

Dream blinks. Breaking his wing? What? He broke his wing? No, no, he’d never do something so awful to Tommy. He’s a *kid*. If it wasn’t for-- you know, everything that happened-- he’d see Tommy as a little brother.

Is that what happened? When he had control a little while ago, and Tommy laid on his lap crying? When he sang to him?

Oh, no. *No* .

He doesn’t even notice the rest of what Philza says, because the horror that goes through him is *awful*.

(The. The demon *hurt* Tommy. Of course, he knew it hurt him, but not-- not that *bad* , right? It *never* would have hurt him like that. It doesn’t *need* to, it has *him* to hurt. But obviously he did, because of that evening where Tommy curled up against his lap sobbing, his feathers all darkened and the bone all crooked...)

He does, however, notice when the sword stabs through his chest.

The pain is sharp and somehow worse than he expected. He’s been stabbed before-- a murky memory of a fight with... *someone?* rises to the surface-- but this hurts even worse, an awful, nauseous pain.

He slumps back to the floor. Philza rips the blade from his chest and he raises his hand, shakily, to touch the stab wound.

His eyes get lidded, and he can’t breathe properly because--

because he was stabbed. That makes sense.

He can feel the blood, pooling around his body, sinking into his hair and skin and clothing.

He’s at least happy he can *feel*, for once.

-

Dream wakes up in bed, which in of itself is a feat.

He’s never in control for very long. Usually, it’s only a few minutes.

But he’s in bed. He’s awake and in his bed.

His chest *aches* from the stab wound.

He sits up, placing a hand on his chest and feeling for the scar. It's hard to feel through his thick hoodie, but he's sure it's there.

"What were you thinking?" He asks the empty air. "Going against one of the best fighters here. You idiot."

The demon, predictably, doesn't bother to answer him.

He swings his legs over the edge of the bed. It's a shitty bed; the demon doesn't need to sleep much, so it's really only there for when it needs to rest Dream's (still human, hopefully) body.

He rubs his eyes and leans his head on his palm. "What were we doing?" he asks, staring at the stone floor of the base. "Why were we there...? That was Techno's place, right?"

He's been trying to figure out what's been going on around him the last few years. (Eight years...) Especially here, in this server 'he' started.

And that was Technoblade's cabin, judging by the context clue of Philza being there. They're usually together, especially nowadays. (...right?)

So. The demon was at Techno's place. Going after Tommy, presumably, because it's been... attached to him. He isn't sure why. (Is it getting tired of him? Can he not... feed it well enough?)

(That idea is terrifying. He doesn't want to hurt anyone, or let it hurt anyone.)

He gets up. His chest still hurts, but that's to be expected; respawn isn't completely painless. He can't remember the last time they-- he-- it? died, but he knows it hurts.

He wishes he wasn't alone. But he's been alone for a *long* time.

He wanders to the small, somewhat sparse bathroom, and stares into the mirror. His face is bare, and he doesn't recognize himself.

His eyes are too clear, too bright. The damaged one reacts poorly to light, and the scar over it sticks out sorely. Both eyes are bruised with lack of sleep, and he doesn't look... healthy.

Did you forget humans need sunlight? he thinks, annoyed.

His mouth hurts, very slightly, so he checks his teeth in the mirror.

One of his teeth is missing. It's a healed hole, so he must've lost it today or very recently. He runs his tongue over the skin of his gums.

"Fuck," he mutters at his reflection.

Something black flickers behind him. It doesn't even scare him anymore.

He wants to go home. This base isn't home, of course. It just... exists as shelter, a place to rest and eat. Home would be with his friends, his brothers, his family.

But they haven't spoken to "him" in a while. The demon has been shoving everyone away.

Even George, which fucking hurts. He was the last person on his side, but the demon managed to fuck that up too.

("You've been... different, lately," George said, softly, sitting curled up next to Dream's body on the couch.

*Yes!* Dream thought, watching through the demon's eyes. *I am! That's not me! You **know** it's not me!*

"How so?" The demon asked, in Dream's voice, with Dream's inflections. It shuffled closer to George and draped an arm around his waist. "I haven't noticed anything different about myself..."

"I don't know," his voice was small. He fiddled with one of his bracelets. "You've just been... distant? You've been leaving a lot and you're out all the time and I feel like--" He sighed, sinking against its side. "I don't *know* . I'm just worried about you, Dream."

It shifted to tilt up his chin, to meet his eyes. "I guess I've been a little stressed," it admitted. "There's just been a lot going on, y'know? I have a lot on my mind." It cupped George's cheek in a warm hand and gently rubbed along his cheekbone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel like I was ignoring you."

Dream screamed inside his own head, metaphorically shaking the prison bars of his mind. *Fuck! No, **stop** touching him, don't listen to it, George!*

Of course, he went unheeded.

George stared up at it's face, traces of anxiety on his expression, but he still leaned into it's hand, melting into it. "It's okay," he murmured. "I'm just worried about you."

The demon grinned; Dream could feel their mouth spread, almost feral. "There's no need for you to worry," it promised, hollow, and Dream screamed again. It leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "I'm all fine.")

Dream sits down on the bathroom floor.

He's learned his lesson about seeking other people out when he's free.

(Technoblade standing over him with harsh, focused eyes, blood on his hands. "Don't you dare get close to me ever again.")

(Sapnap's fiery eyes, sharp fangs bared when he tried to talk to him, sparks flickering in his hair. Purpled avoiding his gaze, ducking down and quickly leaving the area.)

(He's never seen Bad as angry as he was when he snapped into control that day. It was horrifying, and he still isn't even sure what happened. Just that he had an axe and his friend was bleeding and everything felt wrong.)

(George just *disappearing*. One day, he was there, and the next he wasn't. Dream still doesn't know when he left.)

He's so lonely.

He rubs his face, before letting his hands rest between his spread legs.

He should do something to enjoy his brief freedom, but he's far too tired.

(And scared.)



## Chapter End Notes

the real chapter 13 will be around,,,, sometime. idk when i write when i have time and insp lmao

# so bite your tongue and choke yourself to sleep

## Chapter Notes

i stayed up from 1am to nearly 6am to finish this chapter because i realized i could write one specific thing and got so fucking *jazzed* y'all

anyway. im so excited for this chapter to be out in the world. it has so much and i had so much fucking fun writing it. things are going fuckign so fucking well. it was gonna be a lil longer but i realized the pacing was getting weird.

full family angst!!! everyone is suffering!!! \*blows party horn\* it's kind of heavy so please be safe n all fellas (gender neutral)

a few warnings because i imply some stuff: specifically in techno's part at the end, there's references to parental death, house fires, cannibalism (half-cannibalism? makes sense with context) and some pretty nasty injuries. in other parts, there's a reference to child abuse, a reference or two to underage alcoholism, and a reference to uhhh what happens to ranboo when he gets too wet which im pretty sure counts as some kind of warning. body horror? so that's fun.

everything else is pretty in line with the other chapters though? i just wanted to warn a little extra because i kinda went off in some places lmao.

and now i'm going to take a nap have a very sexy and interesting morning

title from choke by i don't know how but they found me. vaguely related: i wrote the very end of this chapter listening to class of 2013 by mitski and boy, did it make me feel forbidden emotions

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As soon as Techno drifts off to sleep, clutching his plush and breathing softly, Phil's shoulders slump and he buries his face in his hands, hunched over on the edge of the bed.

God. *Executed*. They tried-- and technically succeeded-- to execute him. What the *fuck* .

The emotional exhaustion of... well, the past few months in general, but today *specifically*, settles on his shoulders heavily, making him slump further. His wings droop, feathers bending slightly against the bed with a light rustle. It hurts, but only a little.

He hasn't seen Techno *break* like that in a long time. Even his reaction to Wilbur's death wasn't that extreme. He seemed more shocked than anything, then.

(He had joined him to help build this cabin, and came around one afternoon to him standing in front of the in-progress building, tears running down his cheeks and his hand over his mouth.

Phil didn't know what to say-- he was still processing it himself-- so they had stood in the snow together, his hand on his back, their eyes on the setting sun.)

This... seems like something that's been coming for a long time. And he's sure it is.

He knows Techno doesn't let himself feel that kind of vulnerability. He's a master of bottling up feelings, of deflecting, of pushing people away so he doesn't have to rely on them. Even when he was small, he kept things to himself. The fact that he admitted to not one, but two people helping him get out of this situation... it must have been terrible.

He cradles his own head in his hand, and drops the other to hold Techno's unbandaged cheek. He's sleeping deeply, completely exhausted, and with every breath he growls softly. His inhales are slightly stuttered, but he's sure that's just his wound bothering him.

That wound isn't the worst he's seen by far, but Techno's reaction to it was the horrifying part. For a moment, all he could see was that terrified, withering child he found in the Nether, so shocked from trauma and pain that all he could do was stare.

("I'm not going to hurt you," he soothed, kneeling down in front of the scared child in the small hollow of netherrack. "Can you understand me?")

The child stared at him, gold-hued eyes unblinking. Black crawls in blood-poisoning lines across his face, radiating out from the cuts on his cheeks and *just* missing one eye.

After a very long moment, long enough for him to feel a bead of sweat travel from his hairline to his jaw, he nods his head.)

He should have protected him. But he made a choice-- to go after his youngest for once in his life, to keep him safe from a man that only wants to cause him harm-- and no matter how much he wants to, he can't change the past. He can't go back and somehow do both.

Downstairs, he hears the door open. He's too tired to jolt with alarm. He rubs his thumb over Techno's cheek, over the scar from the wither skeleton attack. It had done a number on him, and even now, he's sure they still frighten him.

Techno is actually scared of a lot of things, not that he'd admit to many of them.

Phil sighs, feeling heavy with exhaustion and really just wanting to crawl back into bed. But, no, he has Tommy relying on him and-- fucking-- one of the people who arrested his son downstairs like a morbid houseguest.

(Techno's slurred voice. "Don't kill him.")

He gets up from the edge of the bed. Usually, he feels pretty energetic despite his age, but right now, he can feel all the years piling onto him like stones, pinning him to the floor like a butterfly to corkboard.

(How old he is by now, anyway? All those years alone, mostly in the End or underground, screwed with his sense of time. Hard to measure time when there's no sun, no moon, no day, no night.)

He stretches, everything feeling sore, and gives Techno one more look before going back downstairs.

He's greeted by Ghostbur, sitting at the table, legs curled up to his chest, and bright-blue blood dripping down his chin from a profusely bleeding nose. His cheeks are flushed and there's blood on his sweater and arms, from small wounds that almost look like burns, exposed from his pulled-up sleeves.

He can't help the small part of him that screams in-- exasperation?-- at the sight of *another* hurt son.

He needs a moment, just *one* , to process some of this. Techno's rotting wound, Tommy's mania stemming from Dream's death, the execution, killing Dream in the same way he killed Wilbur, just-- *everything* .

He's not sure he'll get one. Hopefully tonight, he'll have a few hours to himself, to just cry. Maybe go outside and destroy something to get out the prickly feeling of rage that never really goes away.

But for now, he's going to have to help some more.

(May all the gods forgive him, but he's so fucking *tired* .)

"Hey, Ghostbur," he says, keeping his voice soft as to not scare the obviously alarmed ghost. "What happened?"

He looks up, eyes round and alarmingly colorless. (That's one of the hardest things to get used to; Wilbur's deep brown eyes were beautiful and familiar, and they're just... gone.)

He wipes blood from his nose with the heel of his hand, seemingly forgetting that his sleeves are out of the way. "I got caught in the snow," he says, voice more whispery than usual. "Where's Techno?"

Phil rubs his eyes and forces his sigh not to sound annoyed. "He's upstairs, sleeping. Might not want to bother him, he was really exhausted."

"But he's safe?" He presses, looking at him with those unsettling eyes. There are tears caught on their edges, on long eyelashes. "He didn't... he wasn't hurt too bad, right? He didn't... die?"

He slumps into one of the other chairs. "No, he didn't die." He rests his head on his palm. "I had to fix him up, but he's going to be alright. Just... he'll need time to heal." He glances at Ghostbur, who's still staring at him. "Did you... see what happened?"

He gives a tiny nod, wrapping his arms around himself. "Yeah," he whispers. The heartbreak in his voice is strong enough his own chest hurts. "I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. I was so *scared* , Phil. I think he was too, but... you know how he is. He was joking and laughing about it. And then they... dropped that anvil." He lowers his gaze, and is quiet for a long moment.

For a second, all he can see is Wilbur, a long, long time ago. He was still very young-- twelve or so-- and it was the first time he opened up about the people who raised him before he ran away.

("They were... terrible," his voice was small, and he fiddled with his hands absentmindedly. "They insulted me all the time a-and called me names and w-wouldn't let me sleep in a real bed..." He slumped down in his chair. "They hit me sometimes, too.")

Ghostbur wraps his fluffy wings around himself. "I wanted to *help* ," he murmurs, almost sounding like he's alive again. "But I went invisible, and it happened anyway. He screamed so... so loud." He sniffles, blue-tinted tears dripping down his cheeks.

Some of the exhaustion clears out of instinct, and Phil stands, bringing him into his arms and trying to soothe him. "It's okay," he promises quietly, because regardless of his own feelings, he needs to soothe the person he arguably hurt the most. "He's alright, you're alright too. You couldn't stop that from happening."

"I could have *tried* ," he says, tired anger sinking into the words. "But I was just stuck. I had to watch it happen, and it was so terrible and I was remembering awful things the whole time and I--"

he hiccups and hides his face. "I'm a terrible brother."

He sighs, resting his cheek against the top of his head. He's unsettlingly cold against him, and he knows it's not from the snow. "You're not," he assures. It comes out a little hollow, just like he feels most of his comfort comes out. "You're a good brother. Both of your brothers love you a lot, and that's what matters."

"I was *mean* when I was alive," he says, a little angrier. His body seems to flicker as his emotions rise. "I was awful to Techno for years, and Tommy was scared of me, and I was... I wasn't nice at all, when they *needed* me to be nice." He curls his hands into fists and presses them to his thighs. "I want to fix it, but I don't know *how* !"

He holds him close for a moment more, running a hand briefly through his hair. He should be happy he's remembering something that isn't just good things-- he had expressed some frustration about that before-- but he doesn't like the *anger* in his voice.

"I... really don't know either. I wish I did. I wish I could help you." He can't help but feel tears in his own eyes at the level of helplessness.

(He's so *tired* .)

He snuffles and pulls away to rub tears off his face. He's even more flushed, and his nose is still bloody. "I just feel so terrible," he groans. "I was invisible for hours, and the snow burnt my arms, and my head *hurts* ."

Phil kisses his forehead and pushes back his hair. "I'll get you cleaned up, and then maybe you can take a nap." He pauses. "Does sleeping even really help you?"

Ghostbur shrugs, with a weak laugh. "I don't really know. It feels right, though. Just like how I still breathe even though I don't need to."

*That's only mildly horrifying* , he thinks. How casually he speaks about being dead is... something he's having to adjust to.

He's having to adjust to a lot.

He's not sure how much longer he can do it.

(He doesn't really have a choice.)

--

Ranboo stretches his legs out along the basement floor. He's sore from walking and his skin is itchy from the snow.

Tommy chuckles tiredly next to him. "Today has been so fucked up," he mutters, and he nods in agreement. "I woke up way too early for all of this." He shudders, still laughing a little.

He hesitates for a moment, bringing his hand up to scratch at one of his ears. They got snow on them too and now they're all irritated. "You don't *have* to tell me, but... do you actually not know why Dream was here?"

He gets quiet in an instant. He brings one of his wings closer and runs his fingers over the feathers. It's the one that kind of hangs wrong, that he's seen bandaged a few times. He must have broken it somehow. Did he tell him how? He would've written it down, so no, probably.

“...Dream visited me a lot while I was exiled,” Tommy says, speaking very carefully. “He acted like he was in charge of me. I guess he was, but... he was... a dick about it. He’d take all my stuff and burn it, so I never had any tools or anything, and he was just an *asshole* .”

He brings his legs up, in a mirror of only moments ago when Ranboo did the same, and he hugs them with the arm that’s not occupied by their joined hands. “He just... kind of messed with me the whole time. He got in my head about things.”

Ranboo watches him, worried for how quiet and careful he’s gotten all of the sudden, and gently squeezes his hand. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs, anxiety that he doesn’t like welling up in his stomach. Dream has always made him uncomfortable, even though they haven’t talked much. He could imagine him messing with Tommy, though. “Did he come here to... mess with you some more?”

Tommy shrugs. “Yeah. He wanted to make me come with him and shit.” He leans back on the chest and stares at the ceiling, eyes lidded. “I broke his stupid mask and knocked out one of his teeth. Phil stabbed him.”

He winces slightly. “Sounds... bloody.”

“It was,” his voice is odd, a little flat compared to the usual, something unsaid hanging just behind the words. He gives a low sigh. (His hands are shaking and his eyes are slightly shiny, but even Ranboo knows it’d be impolite to point that out.) “But he’s dead for a bit, which is... nice.”

He stretches his legs out again and rubs his face. “We should probably go upstairs. Are you going to go home?”

Ranboo frowns and glances at the ladder. He could hear a lot of the crying and conversation that took place upstairs after they left; his hearing is unsettlingly good. (He wasn’t sure if Techno could cry, honestly. But he was *sobbing* .)

“I don’t know,” he says distantly. “If the snow has stopped, maybe. I can’t walk home if it’s snowing...” he scratches his ear again, ignoring how he feels blood sink into his glove. They’re already stained from helping Techno; he has another pair at home. “I think Philza wants me to leave. He didn’t seem too happy about me being here.”

“He’s just... really, *really* protective,” Tommy rubs his thumb against the side of his hand idly. The contact makes his chest feel warm. “Techno... is kind of his favorite, and he’d do a lot to keep him safe. I’m sure if you explained, he’d understand if you want to stay.” He stands up, pulling Ranboo along with him.

He shrugs, wrapping his free arm around himself loosely. “If you think so. I don’t think I’m ready to walk all that way back yet, honestly.”

He flashes him a quick smile, earnest and bright, making his heart leap with how happy it makes him, and tugs him to the ladder. They climb it, Tommy first, and emerge to see Philza attending to Ghostbur’s bloodied nose.

“What happened?” Tommy asks immediately, something like hysteria at the very edges of his voice. He’s been talking like that off and on this whole time.

“It’s okay,” Ghostbur says immediately, wincing slightly as Phil wipes blood from his chin. “I’m fine. I remembered something bad, that’s all.” He pauses. “A *lot* of bad things, actually. But I’m okay now.”

Ranboo watches the quick succession of conflicted emotions on Tommy’s face. Relief, horror,

relief again, and then a careful amusement. "That's good," he says, softer. "I gotta say, I'm getting a little tired of my brothers coming home all bloody. It's not great for me, I don't think."

"Oh, you think it's hard on you?" Phil says, voice laced with sarcasm. "I'm surprised my heart hasn't given out."

Ghostbur giggles thickly, and Tommy grins. Ranboo doesn't feel like he should be there, but the sarcasm and the happy expression on his friend's face makes him smile too.

"Is Techno in bed?" Tommy asks, walking to the fireplace. He grabs the poker and jabs at the logs in the fire. "Dammit, it's not melting yet."

Curious, Ranboo comes over to see what he means. He peers over his shoulder, and sees an iron axehead laying in the bed of ashes, white-hot but definitely unmelted. "I don't know if it's hot enough," he offers as an explanation. "Why are you burning an axe anyway?"

"Because Dream tried to cut my wings off with it," he says, voice casual, as if he didn't even realize he was going to say it. As soon as the words pass his lips, he goes very pale and puts his hand over his mouth, eyes wide with horror.

They take a moment to process in his own head. Dream... tried to cut off his wings... with an axe.

Something clatters in the kitchen, and Phil swears quietly. It somehow makes everything make sense.

( *"He just... kind of messed with me the whole time. He got in my head about things."* )

(the bandages around his wing-- they had bothered him so much the first time he visited that he wrote it down and added some theories in his memory book and they all jump back to him now, jumbled together, boiling down to *someone hurt him???* )

"Tommy, can I give you a hug?" Ranboo asks, voice just as abruptly casual. He hadn't planned to say that either, but he can't take it back now.

Not with how Tommy stares up at him, blue eyes shining. He can't even be mad that he's looking him in the eyes, even when it makes him start to tremble.

He lowers his hand, and nods shakily.

Ranboo hasn't... given hugs in a while. The last person he hugged was Niki, and she always initiates it.

He still wraps his arms around Tommy and pulls him in close. He feels very small against him, even skinnier than he is, his head only coming up to his shoulder. When his arms circle around him in return, he clings to his (slightly damp) suit jacket, resting his head against his shoulder and sighing. Where his wings brush against him, they're soft, and fleetingly he wishes he wasn't wearing long sleeves, so he could feel his feathers.

He feels a sharp, protective urge that he's never felt before. Tommy is hurt and obviously *scared* , and he's his friend, maybe the only one he has now, with how Fundy barely speaks to him and Tubbo seems lost in his own downfall and Quackity is just... *lost* . Niki is more family than anything else.

He wants to protect him. Pick him up and take him somewhere *safe* and *keep* him there, where nobody can hurt either of them. They're both just teenagers, Tommy's even younger than him, and

they don't need to be so *scared* .

Ranboo only hugs him tighter, lifting him off his feet. This isn't fair. None of this is fair. He doesn't want to let him go. (Maybe he also needs this hug. It makes him feel warm and he's always so cold.)

"Uh," Tommy mumbles, pressed against his shoulder. "You're hurting me a little, big man."

He squeezes him closer for a moment, before gently setting him back on the floor. "Sorry. I just... I don't know." He snuffles, embarrassed by how much it affected him. "Sorry."

He takes his hand, intertwining their fingers again. "It's okay."

Things are quiet, for a long time. They stand together for unmeasured minutes, unspoken emotions and implied things hanging in the air.

Outside, the snow howls.

They sit down in front of the fire, and Tommy rests his head against his shoulder.

Ghostbur joins them on the floor, face now clean. There's drops of blood on his sweater, and his fingers are blue with either his blood or the crystals he carries around. "Hi," he says, voice small, and he pats Ranboo's arm with a terrifyingly cold hand. "Thank you for helping Techno."

He blinks, startled by the contact and the fact that he *knows* . "Oh. You're welcome? How did you... know that?"

"I was following you," the ghost says lightly. "Well, following Techno and Niki, at first. And then I followed the two of you until the snow stopped me." He folds his legs underneath himself and sighs happily. "I'm glad you helped him. He was very hurt and I was scared something bad would happen."

His voice is so cheerful, despite the topic. Ranboo shivers a little; he wishes he could have that oblivious optimism. "I was scared too. But I think he's alright now." If alright means strictly *not dead*, which he's taking it as.

Thank the *stars* for that. For a few minutes, when the snow started, he was so terrified that Techno would lose consciousness, and die out in the cold. He's too heavy for him to carry (because in all honesty, he's not very strong) and he wouldn't have been able to drag him into the cabin.

And the guilt of that would have crushed him alive, heavy as an anvil but much deadlier.

He wants to curl up into a ball and scratch his skin off for what he's done. He had always been very determined not to pick sides in the world, but instead pick *people* .

He thinks he may have picked the *wrong* people.

He thinks about the entirely too pleased grin on Quackity's face when he struck Techno in the shoulder for talking too much and a single tear had slipped down the piglin hybrid's cheek. That really says it all, at least for him.

("Oh, I'm sorry," Tubbo says, smiling, as he pats Ranboo's arm dry after spilling water all over him. "It was an accident.")

He pretends he doesn't see right through him. His shirtsleeve is sticking to his melting skin.)



“So,” Philza’s voice is careful as he comes over to sit on the chair near them. “I’m sorry I threatened you, Ranboo.”

The apology feels slightly insincere, but Ranboo nods, accepting it. “It’s okay. I don’t blame you, I kind of... y’know...” he waves his hands vaguely, accidentally jostling Tommy. “Oh, sorry.”

“s fine,” Tommy replies, leaning further into his shoulder. He seems very tired, and he's warm and heavy against him. It feels nice.

“Thank you for helping Techno,” Phil adds, leaning forward to look down at the three of them. “I... really didn’t know what was going on, so I had no idea what to expect...”

He winces slightly and looks down at his lap, fiddling with his tail. It wraps around his arm to keep from nervously twitching. “It was really terrible,” he admits. “I’m really... really sorry.” His heart feels like it’s in his throat. (He’s not too proud to admit how much Phil scares him. He’s... very intimidating. Much more so than anyone else. )

There’s a long moment of silence. “...can you tell me what exactly happened?” He asks, looking into the fire. He’s tapping his foot and running his fingers over his shiny, emerald earring.

He lets out a little *vwoop* of nervousness, staring at the floor. “Yeah,” he says, voice small. He pulls at his tie, feeling choked.

He explains the situation the same way he explained it to Tommy, maybe with a little more stuttering and rambling.

He ends up having to push his friend away, despite enjoying the physical contact entirely too much, because he’s so fidgety and unable to keep still. He’s scared and nervous. He pulls his knees up to his chest and lets his tail wrap around his legs; he pulls at his ears, his tie, his jacket.

“I really didn’t want to do it, I swear,” he whispers finally, the horrible confession like coughing up glass. It's worse this time, because he can see the anger building in Phil's eyes. “It was t-terrible, I felt so awful about it. But I was scared, a-and...” he trails off, feeling like speaking is going to become too hard at this point. He keeps making little chirps to himself to try and calm down.

There’s too much silence following his words.

Eventually, Phil sighs deeply, and leans back in the chair. He covers his face with his hands, and Ranboo’s stomach twists with guilt.

“That’s horrible,” Ghostbur says softly. He’s sitting with his cloudlike wings drawn closer to his body, and he’s fiddling with a piece of blue. “Why would someone plan something so horrible?”

Ranboo shakes his head, hugging his knees closer to his chest. “I don’t know. Justice, I guess? Or... revenge, maybe.” He thinks about Tubbo’s facial scars, how he admitted they were from his own public execution, done by Technoblade himself.

(Tubbo had leaned back in his office chair, eyes rimmed with red, a glass held in his hand with whiskey still shining in its depths, close to spilling. "I was trapped, and he killed me.")

He's never heard his kind voice so viciously full of rage.)

“I really don’t know. They probably told me why, but... I don’t remember.” He rests his head against his knees and lets out a low noise of concern, though for what he's not sure.

He wishes he could forget the execution itself, but that's already lodged itself firmly into long-term memory.

Yay.

--

At some point, Techno's happy dream of their pretty old house with the neat oak walls and good furniture and the azalea bush on the porch and the protective walls turns into a *nightmare*.

He's not sure when or how it happens. But suddenly, the idyllic tranquility of the sunset turns into a dark, black night, no stars or moon.

The house is on fire. Techno can hear things crashing in the burning building, he can hear one panicked, awful scream that has to be Tommy, he can hear them calling for help. The trees are ablaze and the flowers are nothing but ash. He can't breathe.

And yet, he also can't move. He's trapped standing underneath the old willow tree, the one he used to try and climb with Wilbur on his heels. He was always able to make it higher.

He watches as their entire life goes up in flames.

Everything comes back around to fire, in his life.

His parents were burnt to death, all those years ago; he remembers watching it happen. He remembers watching another house-- this one not as beloved-- going up in flames. They both screamed, he remembers hearing it and not understanding why.

He was just six, oh so lucky to have been playing outside when the fire was set.

And then there were the years in the Nether, raising himself in that hot cradle of fire and monsters and death. Learning things the hard way.

(Avoid open spaces, so the ghasts can't see you as easily.

Stay vigilant of your surroundings, but don't look anything in the eyes; keep your eyes on the ground.

Theft is serious; do so sparingly.

Sleeping is dangerous; only do it when necessary.

Food is hard to come by; you eat as much as you can, and you eat *whatever* you can get. (At some point, he had eaten part of a piglin's corpse, and it hadn't registered to him as *horrific* until he was sixteen and remembered it during dinner. He hadn't eaten for two days afterwards because everything would make him sick.)

(He still doesn't really like the taste of pork.)

Warped vines can soothe burns, but too much makes your skin peel in horrible, bluish-purple patches.

Avoid fortresses and bastions at all costs. ~~He didn't really need that one.~~

And now his home, the only one he's really ever felt safe in, is burning, flames licking the sky, eating the grass. His family has stopped screaming. Something crashes inside and fire billows out the open-- missing?-- front door.

The willow tree hides the path he usually takes to meet up with Dream. They took that very path on their way to the ruins that day, hands intertwined, swords at the ready. Excited for another adventure.

They're suddenly there again, the fire gone, save for the torches on the walls. Did Dream put them there? He can't recall, but why else would there be torches in an abandoned temple, deep underground?

"I don't know how I feel about this place," Techno says, feeling the obsidian on one of the pillars with his gloved fingertip. The red inlaid shapes are mostly in the form of teardrops, for some reason. He runs his palm over them. "It's creepy."

"Yeah," Dream agrees, inspecting the altar. "Is it as bad as that house we found a while back?"

He snorts, turning to join him at the long, high altar. It also has red drops all over it, along with a few long marks like the stone has been gauged. "No, that place was worse. There was a rottin' baby doll in the bathtub, Dream. That's awful."

"I thought the doll wasn't actually that bad. It was the *perfectly preserved* kids room that freaked me out, personally," Dream drawls, running his fingers along the symbols. "What do you think all this means? The pillars have these on them too, right?"

"Yeah. And I think I saw some skulls, too?" Techno adjusts his glasses and kneels down to look closer, curious. "I thought maybe it was a wither. Those are everywhere in old carvings. But not here, it's... just normal skulls."

"Like... human skulls?" he questions. "Weird."

He nods in agreement and leans in to inspect a line of symbols. The drop, the skull, something long and diagonal (a sword? a knife? a spear?) and then a hand, fingers splayed wide. Only lines along the wrist are laid in red.

Something about that makes him shiver, and he stands. He blames it on the chilly cave. "We should go back up, I think..."

"We just got down here, though." Dream's brows furrow. "There's another room, we should go look at that at least. Maybe there's treasure."

Techno's ears perk at *treasure*, his traitorous face breaking into a grin and his equally betrayal-prone tail wagging. "Okay, fine. We'll check it out."

They duck through another small opening in the rock, and come into another open cavern, this one also lit with torches. Despite that, there's still a spider lurking, which Techno cuts down without even blinking.

This room is mostly empty, only possessing pillars and a long ledge of obsidian, almost like a bench, running around the room at about waist height on the two of them.

They search it anyway, and Dream shouts triumphantly as he checks near the entrance. "There's a chest!"

Techno lets out a happy gasp completely involuntarily, and joins him to inspect the contents.

It's unfortunately mostly empty, only a few scraps of stuff like leather and a bit of gunpowder and bundles of dusty paper, but nestled among the useless junk, is a pair of diamonds, a long golden chain, and a book that shimmers with magic.

Dream pulls them out, smudging gunpowder on his fingers. He sits cross-legged on the floor, handing over the chain without complaint when Techno holds his hands out. "Is it real gold?"

He nods, running his fingers over the small links of it. “Yep, it’s real. I’m keeping it.”

“Cool.” He grins, tucking the gems into his pocket. “I thought you were going to bite it, honestly. You did it last time.”

He scrunches up his nose and punches his arm. “You’re a dick.”

He wheezes a laugh, shoving him away, and flips open the enchanted book, inspecting its contents. “Hm... I’m not sure what this one is. Maybe sharpness or something?”

He takes it to look it over as well, but it’s too dark for him to read even with his glasses on. “We can ask Phil when we get back,” he reasons. “C’m on.”

They get up from the floor, and walk out of the small chamber. They stroll past the altar, well on their way to the cave’s entrance, when Dream pauses and returns to the slab of obsidian.

“What is it?” Techno asks. “You said we’d go back after this.”

“Yeah, just... hold on a sec...” His voice is faint, and he runs his fingers along the edge of the rock. “C’mere. I see something.”

Techno is too curious for his own good, so he rolls his eyes with an annoyed huff and joins him next to it again, leaning over to see what he’s looking at on the edge of the slab.

As soon as he leans down a little, Dream grabs the back of his hair and smashes his head against the obsidian.

The pain is dizzying and immediate, and suddenly the room is spinning. A low groan leaves him and his mostly-empty stomach sweeps with nausea. Dream’s hand is hopelessly entangled in his hair, pulling at his braid.

“Dream?” he slurs, as he yanked away from the obsidian and pushed to his knees. His vision is spotted with black and his glasses have fallen off. “Why did... why did you...?”

“Shut up,” his best friend scolds, tightening his grasp on his hair and making him whimper.

“It hurts,” he says with a small whine. “Let go of me, what’s wrong with you?”

He’s shoved towards the altar, his face pressed against the top of it. On his knees, he can just barely reach to do so.

“Give me your arm,” and that’s not Dream’s voice, which still cracks and squeaks often, its too low and smooth. When Techno doesn’t comply, feeling like he isn’t hearing anything correctly, he seizes his left arm and pulls it up to rest near his head. “Good. Be still.”

He’s about to argue that he really can’t move much at all, with his hand in his hair and around his wrist, but talking seems very hard. His mouth has an awful taste in it, like the aftertaste of blood and bile together.

Dream keeps his hand pinned and takes his hand from his hair. He was being held up just slightly, so his head falls down and collides painfully on the rock. He thinks he might scream a bit.

The situation feels wrong and surreal. Surely, he’s only daydreaming on their long walk back up through the cave.

And any minute now, he’s going to focus back on reality, and Dream will laugh at him for zoning

out, throwing his arm around his shoulders, and he won't flinch away because he's one of maybe five people on this planet who's allowed to do that. And then they'll go home, and Phil will look over the enchanted book and tell them what it is, and they'll have lunch together before Dream goes home to his brothers. And Techno will curl up next to Wilbur on the couch, tired from their adventure, and tell him all about the creepy temple. And everything will be okay.

Dream is his best friend. The person he might just trust most in this world. So this can't be real.

Techno's hand is forcefully turned to reveal his inner wrist. Dream has drawn one of his knives, one of the many he keeps on his belt. (He picked up the habit of collecting knives from a friend of his. He can't recall his name now, but he's another person from the Nether... maybe.)

The blade is so sharp, the edge so thin, that he almost doesn't feel it when he drags it along his wrist, and slightly down at an angle. With how his face is turned, he can see the blood immediately well up, startlingly red against his incredibly pale skin. It runs in lines down his arm, hot and fresh.

The smell of it makes him want to scream.

"Dream, *Dream*, stop," his voice comes out too weak, barely even his own. "Please, stop, it hurts, I--"

His hand returns to his hair and pushes his face further against the obsidian, forcing the injured side of his head to press against the unforgiving surface. He lets out a hoarse sob.

It's not real. It's not *real*. Why would it be real? This is just some weird fantasy, cooked up by his active imagination and the creepy temple. It's not real.

*It's not real.*

His blood drips onto the altar in slow, splattering drops. Dream uses the hand he cut him with to swipe blood off his arm and spread it on the rock, before turning his wrist to press it to it.

It's cold against the cut, and he whimpers. It's not real. This isn't *real*.

*Wake up*, he urges himself internally. *Wake up*.

He doesn't. (On more than one level.)

Vaguely, he's aware of a grumbling sound. Of the carvings on the stone glowing brightly, starting where his blood is sinking into them, and that makes a primal sort of fear begin to fill his belly, overriding his horror about the situation.

Dream lets go of him, but he can't move. He feels like some unseen force is pinning him in place, and he's shaking slightly.

He's terrified. He hasn't been this scared in a long time. Maybe ever.

"Dream?" He asks, voice high. "Dream, I can't *move*. Help me." His voice is slurred, the syllables getting low as some part of him just wants to revert to piglin sounds. "Please."

He doesn't help him. Why would he? He obviously planned this to happen, or something like that.

Suddenly, his thoughts sharpen and multiply, what seems like a thousand different voices exploding into his head.

*Fresh blood!*  
*Finally!*  
*A new vessel*  
*Young and healthy and strong*  
*Blood blood blood*

They begin to laugh, in varying tones, sharp and low and high and soft and cackling and mocking. He whimpers, dragging his heavy, bleeding arm over to press a hand over his ear.

He's heard voices before. When he was about ten, he started hearing voices that were definitely not his own thoughts, and it terrified him. They weren't scary, just loud and somehow disturbingly soft at the same time.

He had run through the house in the middle of the night to climb into Phil's bed, scared, and rambled nonsensically about the sounds, the words not understandable as any language, human or otherwise.

*Get up*, the new voices encourage as one. *Get up*.

He does. He isn't sure how he's able to move *now*, but he gets up, pulling himself up with the side of the altar. Blood drips down his arm, down the side of his head from where his head was bashed against the rock.

Dream is standing behind him, smiling with just his mouth, nothing in his eyes. He's looking at him with no care in his gaze, and he doesn't recognize him all of the sudden.

Techno hears a growl leave his mouth, the same kind of growl that he makes when he's protecting his brothers.

*Draw your sword*, they purr. He does, obedient, his body feeling like it's barely under his control. His head is fuzzy with pain and exhaustion and all the noise.

The diamond blade flashes in the torchlight. It's the nice, enchanted one, the one he was given for his birthday, along with his pretty velvet cape. He tightens his fingers around the hilt and the grip presses into his leather gloves.

His best friend is still staring at him, smile widening.

*Spill his blood*, they say, soft, like a mother speaking to her child. *Make him hurt as much as you do*.

His mouth splits in a feral grin, and he lunges forward to slash at Dream's face. Blood blooms from the wound and he goes down with a scream, suddenly sounding terrified.

*Blood for the blood god*, they murmur, and he makes a wild snarling noise in agreement. *You're already doing so well*.

--

Techno wakes up in a panic. Nothing makes sense, and he can't breathe, and his head hurts, and he feels a creeping sense of dread.

Heedless of his *aching* body, he pushes himself into a sitting position and threads his fingers in his hair, choked noises leaving his mouth. It wasn't real. It was a nightmare. A nightmare. It wasn't real.

*It wasn't real wasn't real wasn't real just a nightmare a memory a **very bad** memory*

The small, almost gagging noises turn into a scream, something so weak it's almost ghostlike, and he curls into himself, biting into his hand to muffle the noise.

Everything still feels surreal, like he's trapped in the same fuzzy-headed state he was in for months after the ruins. Feeling like a prisoner within his own body, with the voices screaming so much that he couldn't use his own voice. Walking through his life like a ghost, barely able to do anything.

He doesn't want to feel like that again.

He can't breathe, his chest feels painful and tight, and he can't stop another scream, melting into a weak sob. His hand is bloody and he can taste it and it doesn't help.

He tugs his blankets around himself, burying himself in the heavy fabric to try and feel a tiny bit less like he's falling into pieces. He did that a lot when he was smaller, especially when blankets were more of a novelty to him. (He never had any nice ones growing up.)

His head is all hot and fuzzy and filled with leaden pain, like it was smashed against obsidian again, and he can't form clear thoughts. He just feels so small and scared, like a wandering child in hell, like a concussed, broken teenager in the ruins of the Blood God's temple.

*Someone's here* , the voices choose to inform him very loudly. He whimpers and pulls the blankets over his head, muffling all noise from outside. He brings Marnie close and grips her soft body in his hands. He might get blood on her, but he doesn't care.

"Techno? Why are you hiding?" The mattress dips slightly as someone sits on it's edge, and a hand tugs at his blankets. "It's alright. What's wrong?"

Techno lets out another choked scream as the blankets are pulled away, *no no no those were keeping me safe!* He reaches up to pull them back, but a shock of pain so bad it winds him stops him, and he's left gasping for air.

"Hey, hey. Shhh." A hand brushes through his hair, the contact gentle. "You're okay, shh. I'm here."

The pieces click together in his mind, and the current situation becomes a tiny bit more clear. He's at home, in his own bed. He's sick with a fever-- something to do with potions-- and the wound on his chest is... is from the execution. *His* execution. He was *executed*. He was dragged away from his home, heavily drugged, and executed in public. How many people saw? Oh, *god* .

He was rotting. He can tell in the lingering itchiness of his wounds, how sore he is, how he's trembling. (The method to reverse it makes him shake for days.)

He doesn't know why he feels so horrified and violated. Isn't this what he does to other people? Kill them and ruin their lives? At least he has the decency to be honest about it and not be overly sadistic...

(He thinks they realized how his hair was his vulnerability, because someone was always holding it.)

Fresh tears pour down his cheeks and he chokes, reaching up despite the pain and clutching onto Phil's hand like a scared child. He pulls it to his chest and hugs his arm, hating himself for how he's breaking, but unable to stop himself.

"I know, little one," Phil murmurs, raising his other hand to cup his cheek. The petname makes him whimper like a struck animal; he hasn't used it since he was so, so small, still curled up in a pile of blankets with wither eating away at him despite all efforts to heal him. "I know."

He gasps for breath and collapses back against the pillows, still sobbing. He can't even form words, not even in piglin, nothing coherent in his mind save for pain and shock. Everything seems to crash down on top of him, from his earliest days to his teenage years to his adulthood, in piles and waves of ache and pain and fear.

He's never been one to admit it, but he's been so *scared* for so long.

"Is he alright?" Tommy's voice asks softly. "I heard him crying..."

"I don't know if he's alright," Phil replies, rubbing his cheek softly. He's looking over at his other son, Techno can just see it through his blurry vision. "But I'm trying to help him. Do you want to help?"

"Yeah," the bed dips on the other side, and Tommy's hand wraps around one of his own, tugging it from around Phil's arm. He laces their fingers together gently. "It's alright, Techno. You're all safe here, I promise you."

And he chokes on another sob, because *god* does he sound like Wilbur. And thinking about that only crushes him further, how much their older brother has influenced him.

"Take a deep breath," someone advises him (he can't tell who, honestly) and he does it on instinct, following the order. His chest burns and he swears something shifts. "There you go. You're going to be alright."

If he could speak, he would say *I don't think so*.

## Chapter End Notes

woooo man you can really tell i'm feelin a bit sad from how sad everyone is here lmao

thank you for reading as always!!!! i love you all dearly mwah mwah /p go drink some water/have a snack and if ur like me and essentially pulled an all nighter go to sleep!!!

i am not sorry for how nonsensical everything i'm writing is, i don't care at all :-)) we are here for a good time not a long time fellas. i've gotten to the point where as soon as i finish editing i just slam the post button. no time for overthinking i got self indulgence to craft n a nap to take!!!

im really gonna try to answer comments this time!!! (shakes fist at myself) you people deserve my attention!!!

also fun hint for next chapter: it's gonna be tommy-centric most likely :-)) maybe a nice return-to-form with a single pov chapter??? hm???

also 2x im so glad everyone liked the dream chapter. i love how many people commented a variation of 'you're making me feel *sympathy*??? for *dream*???' it was very funny thank you.





# all those shadows almost killed your light

## Chapter Notes

a nice lil late-night chapter, not as tommy-centric as i would have wanted, to tide us over before i get into The Next Plot Event

posting this one from mobile after writing most of it like that, so it might look a bit wonky. ill edit when im back on my laptop!

this one is a little shorter and lighter, not much happens, but we get some nice character stuff and we are finally out of execution day!!! woوو boy that was a long day lmao. also by the sunk cost fallacy, you guys are required to read whatever i post /j

title from safe and sound by taylor swift ft the civil wars

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They get downstairs from the loft, and Phil seems to become smaller in an instant. Tommy watches warily as he leans back on the wall next to the ladder and sighs, crossing his arms over his chest and staring up at the ceiling.

“...are you okay?” Tommy asks. He’s seen Phil like this before, incredibly exhausted and seeming to crumble below the weight of stress, but he’d like to avoid it getting any worse. (*He’s not leaving again.*)

“Yeah, yeah...” he raises a hand to rub his temple. His eyes are troubled. “I’m alright.”

Silence settles. The fire crackles. Their two guests are quiet; he can hear the small noises Ranboo makes when he’s nervous, but that’s all.

“You know he’s going to be fine,” Tommy adds, glancing up at the ladder. “Right?”

Phil smiles, the sight pale and little more than a tilt of his lips. “Yeah, I know. He’s going to get better. I just...” he trails off, and *god*, seeing that uncertainty makes him feel more afraid than he has in a while.

He moves his hand away from his head and looks up at him with those exhausted blue-green eyes, the shape somehow similar to his own despite the impossibility. (When he was small, people often mistook him for being Phil’s biological son. It always made him so happy.)

He raises his arms and gives another pale smile. “Come here, let me hold you for a minute.”

Tommy accepts it, letting himself be wrapped up in his father’s arms and wings, wrapping his own arms around his shoulders.

(In a way that feels like irony, he’s very aware of how frail they both are. Even with his prowess in fighting and the muscle he can feel on his body even through his clothes, he’s aware that Phil is just like him, hollow bones and delicate, intricate wings and emotions that haven’t been handled yet.)

(he wants to hold him closer.)

He rests his head against the top of his. He's not sure when he got so much taller than him, but it's kind of nice. It feels nice, to be held and hold in return. (Even after all this time, he's fairly sure he's still touch-starved, constantly desperate for soft affection. He could have cried when Ranboo hugged him earlier.)

When they pull away, the knot of exhaustion and despair in Tommy's chest has loosened a little, and Phil's smile isn't quite as fake.

"I should make something for dinner, huh," he says, and when his voice cracks just slightly, he doesn't mention it.

-

The night settles on them. The snow is still coming down, and Tommy watches, as the light fades, the last traces of the morning's event disappearing beneath the white.

Ranboo had asked to stay the night just after dinner, during which he ate very little. Just looking at him, he could tell he was terrified that he'd be kicked out regardless of the storm.

Phil hadn't even blinked when he said *yeah, you can stay*.

Now, he's laying curled up in front of the fire, resting his head on Tommy's lap. He's taken to gently running his fingers through his hair, when he got the okay for it-- his hair is very soft, and the different colors have different textures.

"Have you ever noticed that?" He asks when he notices it, twirling a strand of black from his bangs around his index finger.

"Mmm... not really?" Ranboo blinks at the fire and then yawns, jaw stretching unnaturally wide. It's frightening until he reminds himself *duh, enderman*.

"The black side is a lot softer," he explains, brushing his fingers through it. It's nice. Grounding.

He's starting to... calm down? He's been jittery and anxious all day (see: breaking down giggling in Phil's arms because he saw Dream's dead body) and while he's feeling less sick, he can feel the weight of exhaustion pulling him down, pushing him into the floorboards. He hasn't been this tired since he first got here.

The fact that he's worried for Techno doesn't help. He seems to be completely unraveling; he's never seen him cry like that, not even when Dream cut his hair or when he and Wilbur had that fight. Techno doesn't cry; he lashes out and he gets angry and he gets fidgety and twitchy from anxiety, but he doesn't *cry*.

And yet, he had been sobbing so hard he was almost screaming just a bit ago, clinging to Phil with all he has, obviously in pain. He was so upset he couldn't speak.

Is this how he felt when he was so sick? Unable to keep his thoughts from straying to the darkest possible scenarios about his brother?

His shame about putting him through all that rises in his throat again. How could he do that to him? Especially when he was evidently living his own life, happy and alone?

He stares down at Ranboo's hair, fiddling with the coarser white strands.

“Are you okay?” His friend asks quietly, still staring into the fireplace. “You got quiet...”

Tommy sighs, bringing a hand up to rub his eyes. “Yeah, just... tired, I guess. I should probably go to bed soon.”

He yawns again, prompting him to do the same. It makes them both laugh. “You can go ahead,” he says, through giggles. “I need to sleep too.”

He shrugs, glancing up from Ranboo to check briefly around them. Phil is at the table, cleaning his wings and muttering to himself, and Ghostbur has taken his usual place in the armchair, curled up impossibly small and scribbling in a book.

“...I don’t really want to sleep,” he admits. “I get really bad nightmares.” *And the last time I woke up, I was nearly kidnapped and my brother was arrested and nearly died.*

“That makes sense,” Ranboo says, turning to look up at him. “I do too. And I sleepwalk.”

“I wake up crying a lot,” he adds. “Do you?”

“Sometimes,” he shrugs as best he can while lying down. “I don’t usually remember them when I’m awake. What do you have nightmares about?”

He keeps fidgeting with his hair. “A lot,” he mutters. “Dream, most of the time... and stuff that he did.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Oh.” He looks distant and distracted, fiddling with his tie. “I’m sorry that he messed with you so much. He... makes me uncomfortable, so... I kinda get it.” His long tail curls up to rest on his stomach, the furred end twitching.

Tommy sighs and his shoulders sink. His bad wing spasms and he winces, biting into his tongue. “So, you sleepwalk?” He asks, looking for a distraction.

“Mhm,” Ranboo nods, covering his mouth as he yawns again. His eyes are getting lidded-- he’s sure he looks the same. “Not every night... but sometimes I just wake up in weird places ‘cause I walked there. I do stuff sometimes, but... I can never remember it.” His face gets a little troubled and he rubs his cheek with his fist.

He nods, patting the top of his head. “That sounds scary...”

He shrugs again. “Mm, not really. It worries me sometimes, but I don’t think about it a lot.” He turns back to the fire and shifts his head against his lap. The physical affection is so nice, and Tommy feels warm with more than just the roaring fire.

He keeps brushing his fingers through his hair, pulling his wings in closer. “I’m gonna sleep right here,” he mutters, eyes fluttering.

“Alright,” he agrees, leaning up into his hand. “Night, Tommy.”

He hums lowly in response.

(He loves the affection, so much, but it makes his stomach hurt in an odd way.

It reminds him of Tubbo. And he *misses* Tubbo. His thoughts on him are... complicated, right now, but he definitely misses him.

It feels like his soft memories of him from when they were younger, before all of this, and the

memory of him pouring weakness potion into Techno's mouth while grinning, are so separate as to be completely different people.

When they were younger, they were incredibly affectionate. Tommy was even more clingy than he is now, and Tubbo had always allowed it; the two of them spent a lot of time cuddling and holding onto each other. They would sit right next to each other at the table or on the couch, they would share a bed, and Tubbo was one of very few people allowed to touch his wings, even before all of this.

"Your feathers are so soft," Tubbo sighed, pressing his face against his back. His fingers stroked along the length of his wing. "I like petting them."

Tommy shivered and then giggled at the feeling, his chest feeling warm.

And now, something just seems... off. Even before he was exiled, Tubbo seemed to be changing, subtly and slowly. (He hasn't been the same since Techno killed him. The memory makes a small flame of rage spark to life in Tommy's chest.)

And... he hasn't seen him in a while, but just from the glimpse he got that morning... he can't be doing well. He hopes the glee he saw on his face, the redness of his eyes, is just a problem of memory recall, affected by how distressed he was...

He places his hand over his compass and slides his fingers over the inscription.)

He sighs and closes his eyes. It's going to hurt his back, sitting on the floor like this, sleeping sitting up, but he doesn't want to move and disturb the peace he's found himself feeling.

(When he wakes up briefly, well into the night, he finds that there's not only a blanket draped around his shoulders, but laid over Ranboo and Ghostbur, as well.)

-

The sky is black when Phil steps off the porch.

He knows he shouldn't go far. And he won't.

Everyone is asleep. Tommy fell asleep sitting up, his hand still entangled in Ranboo's two-tone hair, while his friend dozed on his lap. Ghostbur was snoring in the armchair when he left. And Techno hasn't stirred since his fit earlier. He wrapped blankets around all of them.

He should have time.

He draws in a deep breath, standing in the heavy snow, undisturbed since the storm ended. His wings are stretched out in the cool air and the wind is soothing against his feathers.

When he takes off, it numbs his face.

He doesn't go far. Just to a small, nearby cave, that he saw one of his first times visiting. He's flown to it a few times, just for the silence and calm of it all.

He lands lightly, shaking out his wings and sighing deeply.

He rolls his shoulders, sore with the weight of his emotions and his wings.

He sits down on the stone. His whole body slumps and he rubs his face. He's not surprised when tears slide down his cheeks and wet his hands.

The day is beginning to crash down around him.

Tommy's wing stretched out, an axe blade pressed against his feathers, his hysterical giggling, how he passed out on the floor.

Techno's rot-edged wound, how he clung to his arm, looking no older than he was when he met him, haze of a fever in his eyes.

Ghostbur flickering with anger, his voice only a step away from his living counterpart's voice, desperately wanting to fix things yet seeming so helpless.

Hell, even Ranboo's nervous state, how he wrapped Tommy up in a hug as soon as he looked like he was upset, how his voice trembled when he explained the arrest...

He buries his face in his hands. His wings wrap around his body like a hug, blocking out the cool wind with the thick feathers and muscles.

He draws in a deep breath, catching on a sob. There's too much, the guilt and trauma and grief pushing him flat to the ground, and he's at the end of his rope. He can't take much more of this, but he knows he'll have to.

He owes it to his kids, both the two who are still alive and the one he slayed. He needs to be there for them. Especially now, with how Tommy is on the edge of breaking down, how Techno *has* already broken. How Ghostbur looks miserable, trapped in his memory loss and desire to help things.

He needs to help them. He wishes he could just erase all that's hurt them, even his own involvement in it; he just wants them to be *happy* again.

He has clear memories of when his boys were happy; Techno's excited squeals when he learned how to braid his hair, Wilbur's eyes lighting up when he got his first guitar, Tommy's tiny wings fluttering when he picked him up and held him close.

And now things are bad and getting worse.

Tommy was abused, his wing was broken (god, the psychological and physical trauma of that is too much for him to even imagine) and he doesn't know if he's noticed how often he hurts himself.

Techno was *executed*, he used a totem (the fear that struck him at that confession made him want to be sick, he was so scared of the blood he'd find being the same awful shade of his own) and judging by how he reacted when he woke up earlier... a lot of things are crushing him.

And Ghostbur... he can't even get into what must be wrong with him.

(After he killed Wilbur, he washed blood off his hands for what felt like two hours. His skin was raw, and yet he could still feel it.)

He doesn't know what to do. He never really has.

He pulls his wings in closer, pressing his face against the feathers. His fingers pull at the collar of his nightshirt, moving it aside enough to withdraw his ring from where it hangs on a thin chain against his chest.

He slides it around his finger and holds it gently against his lips, tears dripping down his cheeks.

“You were married?” Wilbur asked. His long legs dangled off the edge of the pier and he leaned back on his elbows, eyes on the sky.

Phil kept his eyes on the water, rubbing his thumb against his ring. “...yeah. I was.”

“What was she like?” He tilted his head to the side to look up at him. “Would she have liked us?”

His smile was pale. “She was amazing.” That’s all he could get out on that, throat feeling tight. You’d think the years would dampen the grief. “And she would have *loved* you.”)

He lets himself cry. Not for long, no more than a few minutes, but he allows himself to cry. The air freezes the tears to his skin, and he begins to shiver-- he didn’t dress for the weather, so desperate to be *away* .

With a sigh, he gets up. He places his ring back against his chest, the metal warm, and he runs a hand through his hair.

He flies back to the cabin, limbs feeling heavy. He stumbles when he lands, and he feels off-balance the entire walk back inside the house.

He’s still crying.

When he climbs up into the loft, after managing the fire, Techno is awake. He’s sitting, half-slumped against the wall behind his bed, holding his communicator and running his fingers over it.

“You’re awake?” Phil asks, voice a little too soft. He wipes his face dry on his sleeve and sits down on the edge of his bed, holding his head in one hand. “How are you feeling?”

In the dim light of a barely-burning lantern, he can just see him shrug. “Not good,” he says, voice weak. “It hurts.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, watching him from his bed. “Anything I can do?”

He lets out a low, amused snort. “Kill me,” he jokes weakly.

Phil’s feathers ruffle and he has to bite down more sobs. He doesn’t-- he doesn’t know, it’s fine. He doesn’t know how that makes him feel.

(“*Kill me, Phil! Kill me!*”)

(He refuses to tell him. He knows it’s selfish, but he can’t even imagine the betrayal on his face when he confesses.)

“I can’t do that,” he says, pretending that his voice doesn’t crack. “You should get some more sleep.”

He fiddles with the device in his hands. “...had a nightmare again,” he admits. “Scared to sleep anymore.”

Silence, then. Phil stares at the ceiling.

(He knows, logically, that the world is unfair. That horrible things happen to those you love most.

That those you love most can *do* horrible things; as much as he adores Techno, wants nothing but the best for him, he knows what he’s capable of. He doesn’t doubt that on some level, the days

events were justified.

But god, he hates that knowledge.)

“I really wish I could help,” he says, and fresh tears cut down his cheeks, hot in the cool room.

“S’okay,” Techno replies in a slurred voice, making him sound even younger. “Gonna read a book or somethin’. Will the light... bother you?”

He shakes his head, moving to lay out on his back on his bed. “No, it’s fine. Go ahead.”

“Alright.” The lantern brightens slightly, and Techno’s footsteps cross the room, quiet. “Sleep well.”

He rests his arm over his face. “Goodnight, Techno.”

Polite as ever, he doesn’t mention how obvious it is that he’s crying.

-

Tommy wakes up to something smashing in the kitchen.

He jolts, eyes flying open, hands scrambling for the nearest-- weapon, he supposes, even though he doesn’t have one.

Ranboo sits up as well, a drowsy and shrill chirp leaving his mouth. His mouth moves to speak, but all that comes out is inhuman warbling with a questioning inflection; definitely whatever the enderman language is.

Tommy turns his head towards the kitchen, his eyes wide with alarm ( *Dream Dream Dream oh god not again can’t do this again* —) and finds Techno standing in the middle of the room, looking bewildered and tired. Broken glass sparkles on the floor, amid spilled honey.

“Oh,” his shoulders slump and he gives a tired laugh. “You okay, Techno?” His voice gets soft as he observes him. He’s put a shirt on-- a sweater, actually, that soft blue one-- and his hair is down, slightly wet. (He must have taken a bath already, despite it being just past dawn.)

“Y-yeah,” he croaks out, voice completely wrecked. He supposes that’s from crying so long and so hard last night. “I’m... I’m fine.” He leans on the counter, seeming to consider his words.

Ranboo makes a disgruntled noise and flops back down to the floor, pillowing his head in his arms. His ears flick and settle against the sides of his head, and his tail curls over his side. He’s making sleeping sounds within seconds.

( *Note to self: Ranboo is not a morning person.* )

“Can you... can you come help me clean this up?” Techno asks, sounding as if he’s on the verge of tears again. “Leanin’ over makes my head hurt.”

“Yeah, sure.” Tommy gets up from the floor. He was right; his back *aches* from sitting on the floor. “What were you trying to do?”

“...don’t really know,” his voice is still weak, trembling, with a growly edge and even lower, quieter tones than usual. He’s surprised he’s talking at all, honestly. “Lookin’ for something to eat, maybe.”



He yawns and joins him in the kitchen, stretching his wings idly. They're stiff-- he'll have to go outside for more space later.

(The idea makes his chest hurt. Dream... could come back. He could... hurt him again.)

(God, the idea of what would have happened to him, had Phil not woken up and defended him... it's enough to make him scream. Dream would have succeeded in completely breaking him, this time.)

He takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his hair. He cleans up the broken glass and honey from the floor with an old rag, tossing it all in the trash.

Techno doesn't seem to care, leaning back on the counter, eyes closed and face... not relaxed, but flat, so tired as to be calm. "I... I'm tired," he mutters. "What happened...?"

Tommy's stomach drops. He clears his throat and goes to wash his hands. "Do you... not remember?" he says hesitantly. "You were... uh, kind of executed, Techno."

He blinks a few times, hugging himself loosely. With his hair down, falling in loose pink waves around his cheeks and shoulders, and his face rendered soft with exhaustion and agony, he looks very young.

"Oh," he says, practically growls, "Yeah, I remember. I thought... I thought that it was just a nightmare..." He raises his hand up, and Tommy has to jerk forward and pull it away before he bites himself. "...I'm sorry." His eyes look sad, drawn down with pain.

For a moment, Tommy feels like he's the older one here. Not in a bad way, but there's a flash of protectiveness, of wanting to pull him into his arms and keep him safe from the world that only wants to cause them all pain. It's strong enough to make his eyes tear up.

He sighs and intertwines their fingers, keeping Techno's hand away from his mouth. (He remembers him doing biting himself a lot when they were younger-- Wilbur would get *so* angry with him.) "It's alright," he assures him. "From what you said, it sounded pretty nightmarish."

He shrugs a little, swaying against the counter. "It... wasn't good," he admits. "...but it's over now." His voice sounds a little desperate. "Right?"

"Yeah," he says, keeping his voice soft. "You're here now, and you're safe."

A few seconds of silence pass, before Techno snuffles and rubs his face. "I need to eat..." He sounds unenthusiastic. He feels a profound sympathy.

"I'd offer to make something for you, but I still can't cook to save my life," Tommy tries to smile, tries to joke. He gets the tiniest smile in response. "I think we still have the bread you made the other day. How about a sandwich?"

"You don't have to do anythin' for me," he mumbles, rubbing his neck. "You can go back to sleep."

He shrugs. His eyes itch with exhaustion and he'd love to lay out in his bed for a bit, but he's very aware of a strange desire to take care of his brother right now. "I'll take a nap later. No offense, but you look like you're going to pass out if you walk around too much. Sit down."

That earns him a small, annoyed grunt and an eye roll, but he looks grateful when he sits down at the table.

-

Ranboo tugs his suit into a slightly more presentable state as he walks towards his house. He's still itchy from the snow and he's very tired from all the walking, but he's ultimately content.

Some of the guilt is gone. Technoblade is alive and maybe not well, but safe with his family. He messaged Niki this morning, telling her the good news (he had too much on his mind last night) and she was enthusiastic in her reply, telling him that Techno had informed her of the same, and that she was very happy they were both okay.

And not to mention: he got so much physical affection yesterday. Just thinking about the fact that he felt so safe with his head lying on Tommy's lap, not even pausing to feel afraid that he was too vulnerable, too exposed, or being annoying... it makes his face get hot and his tail wag excitedly.

He opens the door into his house, excited to get inside and maybe take a short nap (he slept comfortably, but not very much) and he stops short at the sight of a figure in his living room.

"Oh, you're home?" Tubbo says lightly, turning to him, brows raised as he smiles. In the low lighting, it feels sinister.

"...yeah," Ranboo waves a hand hesitantly. "Hi, Tubbo. What're you doing here?" (*Why are you in my house?*)

His friend smiles wider and folds his hands behind his back. "You disappeared yesterday. I was worried, especially when you were gone overnight."

Anxiety curls like an eel in his stomach and his tail flicks against his leg. "Oh, I went for a walk and got super lost," he winces when his voice cracks.

"Really," he replies neutrally, looking him in the eyes. He knows—he knows what that does to him. He can't move. And it's frightening, because Tubbo of all people has been very respectful of that. "Did it rain last night? Your ear is all... burnt."

He can't move to touch his ear, but it twitches minutely. "Uh, yeah. I, haha, wandered pretty far and it started raining. I forgot my umbrella, too."

"That's a shame," he's still smiling, polite. It doesn't reach his eyes, red-rimmed and shining. (*Is he drunk? Again?*) "I'm... ah, sorry about yesterday. I expected it to go much better."

Ranboo chirps nervously, his mouth the only thing that can freely move. "It's okay. I... it was justified." He keeps his eyes on the scar along his jaw. "I mean, considering what he did..."

"Still. I know it must have been upsetting; you told me you've never liked violence or blood." Tubbo finally looks away and he draws in a deep breath. He was beginning to tremble. "I'm pretty disappointed he got away, but he won't be doing anything to us for a while."

(*He wasn't doing anything anyway.*)

"Yeah," he nods, agreeable as ever. "Uh, I was about to take a nap... I didn't sleep great last night." He fiddles with his fingers; his blood-stained gloves are tucked into his back pocket. "I'll see you later...?"

His smile becomes more genuine, and he nods. "Of course. There's a meeting later, will you be there?"

He shudders a little at the idea. Meetings tend to devolve into shouting, and while he gets why, that doesn't mean he doesn't hate it. "Maybe..."

"That's good enough. I hope you can get some sleep." He brushes past him as he walks to the door, grasping his arm as he passes. "I'll see you later."

He nods with a quiet goodbye, and when the door clicks softly shut behind him, he slumps.

He lays down in bed, and does not sleep.

-

"Where are you going?"

Techno's hands spasm and he drops his braces back onto the table. "Outside. Gotta check for threats."

"No." Phil says, giving him a dark look from across the table. "You're not doing that. You still have a fever and you can barely walk, Tech."

He gives a light growl and yanks on his braces, tightening the laces with his teeth. "Yes I am, and you can't stop me."

He strides over to the door to grab his cloak, wrapping it around his shoulders and pretending it doesn't hurt his painfully twitching hands when he clasps it.

He knows, logically, that he's right. Standing up is making his head spin, and he should stay down to let his ribs heal. It's only been two days since the execution.

(He's had nightmares the entire time, and when he's awake, the voices do little but scream incoherently for blood. Even now, they chant.)

But honestly, he's not following his logic right now.

He's following his paranoia.

"Be back in a bit," he calls behind him, and shuts the door before he can be stopped.

He steps into the snow, and it crunches lightly under his boots.

(He feels unbalanced. Like he'll collapse any moment.)

With measured, slow steps, he stalks around the house, both alert and nearly half-asleep. He feels Nether-hot, and he doubts his ability to fight.

But he needs to be sure.

He needs to know they're *safe*.

He holds the axe more for stability than for protection. It's heavy and familiar, and its blade flashes in the low sunlight.

(His ribs ache, a raw, white-hot pain. He might be bleeding again.)

He makes his way around the house, slow and steady. His head feels fuzzy and he isn't sure how focused he's going to be if someone attacks him.

“Techno,” Phil calls from the porch, sharp and cold. “Back inside, *now* .”

He shakes his head, preparing to make another lap around the house, farther out, closer to the trees.

(Lurking, behind that thick birch, potions and axes, golden wings and orange fur and gleaming pointed horns.)

(Dream in the window, listening to Tommy beg for his life.)

“*Technoblade* .” The scolding tone makes him flinch in place and he goes wide-eyed, staring up at him from the ground. “Inside. *Now* .”

Immediately, he follows the demand, almost on instinct. He goes up the stairs and to the door without thinking, and by the time he opens it and steps inside, he’s already being pulled along, sat forcefully in a chair.

“Why were you outside?” Tommy asks, sitting on the edge of the counter with a mug in his hands. “You shouldn’t be up.”

Techno shrugs, his head suddenly heavy again. The flash of clarity that came with his paranoia is fading, and he’s going back to the tired, feverish place he’s been in since the execution... complete with extra pain from using his arms for *thirty fucking seconds* .

“I’m going to lift up your shirt and check your bandages,” Phil says, setting his cloak aside (when did he take it off?) and tugging up the white fabric of his laced shirt. “Shit. Techno, you’re bleeding.”

He frowns and stares at the table. “...sorry.” His head aches and the only reason he’s not crying is because he’s too worn out.

“You need to be more careful,” he says, letting go of his shirt. “I just put them on, so you should be fine for now. But you need to *rest* . We’re perfectly capable of protecting ourselves while you heal.”

“Again, Techno, I’m a big, strong man,” Tommy pipes up from the counter. “And Phil is *terrifying*. Angel of Death, and all. Nobody’s gonna fuck with us.”

He sinks against the back of the chair, tail flicking and then drawing around his waist. “...just want to make sure you’re safe,” he mutters. “M’scared you’ll get hurt and I won’t be able to help. It’s my job, have to protect you...”

And because the fever, the exhaustion, the hot pain, makes his tongue so loose, he continues with “‘m not worth it if I can’t— can’t *protect* you...”

They all fall silent. He draws his braced hands up to his chest and presses them to his wound, feeling the low hum of pain.

Phil sighs and pushes back his hair, resting his hand on top of his head. He wants to lean up into it, and he’s just weak enough to do it.

“You’re very much *worth it* even when you can’t protect us, Techno.” He promises, all his rage fading into something soft. “We’re not going to... stop *loving you* because you’re hurt and need to rest.”

“No, no— Techno, lay down, you’re sick!”

“But they’re out there, they’re gonna *hurt* you—”

“I can handle it! Go back to bed, I’ve got this.”)

Tommy makes an agreeing sound, slipping off the counter with a light sound and coming over to his side, touching his shoulder. “You do a lot to keep us safe,” he says, all too sincere. “You deserve a break... even if you’re only taking it because you’re hurt.”

Techno swallows forcefully. He thought he was too worn out to cry anymore, after that being most of what he did for two days, but he feels the sting of tears now.

(He cried a lot, as a kid. At one point, in his teen years— during the empire, maybe— he joked that he stopped crying because he got it all out as a child.)

“You need to heal, and for that to happen, you need us to let us take care of you,” Phil pets his hair lightly, and then it’s all over.

(Again, his hair is his weakness.)

“Okay,” he whispers. “I’ll... I’ll rest. I’ll...” it tastes awful on his tongue to admit it, “let you take care of me.”

It’s the first time in a while that his father doesn’t look completely exhausted. “Good. Now, let’s get you laid down again.”

## Chapter End Notes

\*slams post button and falls the fuck asleep\*

honestly idk if this will even stay up lmao im buzzed and making Decisions

## brave as a noun

### Chapter Notes

haha we're not talking about anything that has happened. nothing has happened on the smp recently it's fine.

seriously though i'm not actively keeping up because of my hell brain but i know what's going on and like. wow. that's fun huh

anyway, fun and sexy chapter for y'all this time! and by fun and sexy i mean you're all going to scream.

warnings for this chapter: references to suicide (it's not real, but the grief is) underage alcoholism, themes of emotional manipulation/abuse (dream is here :-)) and just a lot of really unfortunate feelings.

this is much shorter than usual, but that's because i had to chop up this chapter a bit, and also. just. can't consistently write super long chapters lmao i'd rather write short, concise(ish) chapters that cover what i want to write than force myself to a certain word count y'know?

*this one* sets up a very important future plot event (folks who follow me on tumblr might know what i'm talking about)

title is the name of an ajj song!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The nightmare is vague and troubling, as they always are.

He's being chased. Of course it's one of those dreams, one of the dreams where he's being *hunted*.

He runs, light on his feet, even at the worst of times, but no matter how fast he runs, how hard he pushes himself, the figure in pursuit is no less than a few feet behind him.

Some nights, the figure is someone he knows, Whoever he's most scared of, at the moment; Dream (less frequent, nowadays), or Schlatt, or Technoblade, or...

(One notable variation was Tommy. That was a bad night.)

Tonight, though, it's only a vague, dark figure, howling like a beast as it chases him through a dense, dark forest.

There are no other monsters;

*it's just him and the dark figure,  
chasing him through the infinite forest  
snapping at his heels with sharp teeth  
yanking at his hair, his tail, taking hold of his horns to pull him back before releasing him and  
letting him take off again*

*tripping up his feet*  
*grabbing his legs*  
*catching him by the back of his shirt and lifting him up, opening its black mouth to devour him*  
*whole --*

Tubbo wakes up, completely paralyzed, in bed. His eyes are open and he's staring up at the darkened ceiling, only shafts of moonlight coming through the curtains.

**Oh.**

There are black hands at the corners of his vision. Getting close, so close, to his shoulders, his hair, his arms.

He wants to close his eyes and go back to sleep. He's so tired, *please just let me sleep more, please*  
--

He screams inside of his head as the black hands creep closer to him, wrapping around his limbs. The figure leans over him, all too reminiscent of his dream, and it grabs his cheeks, his neck, fingers sliding into his mouth--

-

When he wakes up again, he's able to move. Not that he wants to; it's only eight in the morning, he can sleep some more, right?

Ugh, but he's thirsty and forgot to bring water to his room last night. And he needs breakfast,, because he's incredibly hungry and his stomach is growling.

He pushes himself into a sitting position, groaning, and rubs his eyes. Sunlight bleeds through the curtains and while it's only mild, he feels incredibly annoyed by it. His head *aches* , but it always does in the morning.

(He didn't drink much last night, because he was up late doing paperwork with Quackity. And by paperwork, he means mostly playfully bickering with the older boy and talking about their lives. That was nice, though; he felt so normal, even ignoring the glasses of wine he was drinking.)

He stumbles out of bed and to the bathroom, and then to the kitchen. He gets himself a glass of water and sips it, well aware that he's still trembling even though the nightmare was hours ago.

He peruses the kitchen for something to eat for breakfast, and settles on some pastries he got from Niki a few days ago. There's only two left, so he takes both, along with a cup of coffee, with far too much sugar and cream. (He doesn't really like coffee, but he likes the caffeine; it helps his headaches.)

He sits down at the table and finishes his water out of a desire to say he's at least somewhat taking care of himself, and then moves onto his coffee. (At least he's not as far gone as Schlatt was. The man drank with breakfast most mornings.)

He picks at his pastries, which are delicious as usual, and sips his coffee. The morning is very quiet and peaceful, and he feels... content, for the first time in a while, even considering the nightmare he had. Days, at the very least. Maybe even weeks.

He's licking jam off his thumb and getting up to grab a book-- reading while eating is something he's always liked-- when someone knocks on the door.

Tubbo frowns and sets his book back on the shelf on the shelf. Who would be bothering him this early? Everyone he knows would at least *call* first.

Well... except *one*.

He yawns and walks to the door, opening it, knowing full well who he's going to see.

Dream's mask flashes in the morning sunlight, and he tilts his head. "Good morning, Tubbo," his voice is odd, something emotional and strange, but he doesn't care to decipher why. Quite frankly he doesn't have the energy for him this early.

"Morning, Dream. What brings you over... so early?" Tubbo asks, trying to keep his voice friendly despite the fact that he'd love to just slam the door in his stupid hidden face. "I was just finishing breakfast." Please leave me alone and let me eat my pastry in peace.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to interrupt," he doesn't sound remotely sorry, at all, "I just have some... news. It can wait for you to finish eating, though, if you want to let me in...?"

He sighs deeply, unable to help it. "Yeah, come in. Do you want some coffee while you wait?" Damn his desire to be a good host. He still wants to shut him out, but he's inside now and that would be incredibly rude, even for his sleep-deprived, mildly hungover self.

"That would be nice. I can get it, though, you go finish your food." Dream walks into his kitchen like he owns the place, flipping a knife in his hand before putting it back in the holster at his thigh.

Tubbi briefly considers grabbing one of the coffee cups and bashing it into the back of his head. He can just *imagine* the blood matting his dirty-blond hair. He contents himself with picking apart his pastry.

Dream pours himself a cup of coffee, adding nothing to it (which is slightly appalling, but not surprising) and sits across from him at his round kitchen table. He pushes his mask off his face, revealing most of his features. Tubbo decides not to comment on it, but he does sneak a few long looks at him.

He has bright-green eyes, and a nasty, pink-white scar across the middle of his face. His freckles are dark and he has sharp teeth, like fangs.

For a few minutes, they sit in nice if not slightly uncomfortable silence. At least he has some company.

Tubbo chews on a piece of the flaky pastry, feeling the sticky berry jam on his teeth and one side of his lip. His sweet tooth has gotten worse lately; he's probably being too indulgent with the treats, too. He's gained the slightest bit of weight, and he's sure binge-drinking doesn't... help.

Whatever. It's the least of his problems.

(He's still so angry about the botched execution. And Ranboo disappearing after it. And no one seeming to be honest with him. And the ghost of his father floating around, fucking with him. And well... he has a lot to be angry about.)

"So, how're you doing lately?" Dream asks, sipping at his coffee and tapping his fingers on the table. "I haven't come around in a while..." His voice still has that odd tone, and vaguely, Tubbo is worried about that.

"I'm fine," he lies. "The execution didn't go well, but... I'm sure you know that." He bounces his



leg, sipping from his own coffee. He thinks back to that message, the one that came while they were returning to L'manberg... "How did you die?"

Dream smiles, all teeth. He's missing one; was it like that before? "I got into a little bit of a fight." There's something cruel in his voice now, and Tubbo wants to get up and leave the room. The uncomfortable energy in the room has become something dangerous.

"Interesting," he says, flat. His pastry is finished, so he pushes his plate away, taking his coffee in hand. "What did you come over to talk about, Dream?"

He sighs, his smile softening into something kind, which isn't good. Dream looking kind isn't good. "Right." He leans back in his chair. "Are you sure you're ready to hear it? It's... you're not going to like it."

He bristles, fur rising on his ears. "I'm sure."

Dream gives a small, strained laugh. "I, uh... I found out where Tommy's been." He doesn't make eye contact, and he fiddles with a black ring around one of his fingers.

A jolt goes through Tubbo's whole body. His eyes widen and a hesitant smile crawls across his face. "Really?" He asks, voice going soft. There's a warmth in his chest, unrelated to the still-hot coffee in his hands. "Are you sure? Oh gods, where has he *been*?"

He's never seen Dream flinch as he does after his words. "That's, uh... that's what I have to tell you. Tubbo... he's *dead*."

He's suddenly freezing.

Once, when he was eleven or twelve, he had fallen through the ice on the lake they used to skate on, near where Tommy's family used to live. The freezing feeling that grips him is similar to that horrible moment of weightlessness before he met the cold water.

He remembers screaming and grabbing at the ice, cracking it further. He remembers Schlatt hurrying across the ice to grab him from the water, Wilbur at his side, Techno and Tommy just behind him. It erased his fear, being immediately attended to, cared for. Nothing too bad could happen to him, then.

He was promptly carried inside, dried off, and dressed in dry clothes. Schlatt let him curl up on his lap to stay warm, wrapping him up in blankets in front of the fireplace. Tommy joined them, draping his heavy, fluffy wings around Tubbo and allowing him to bury his face in his shoulder to warm his cold nose and cheeks. He complained when his damp hair got in his face, but only held him tighter when he tried to pull away.

There's no one to save him from the icy water, this time. No father or older brother figures or best friends to pick him up and dry him off and hold him.

He's drowning, freezing, inhaling water so cold it hurts.

"How?" he whispers, staring at him, hands going tight around his cup of coffee. (He doesn't even like coffee. Why is he drinking coffee?) "I check the comms every day, I... I would have *seen* it..."

"They malfunction sometimes, you know that," he says, and his gentle voice makes Tubbo shudder, covering his mouth and feeling tears drip down his face. "I couldn't find his body, but... I found..." he reaches into his pocket and withdraws a folded piece of paper. "He left a note."

Tubbo takes the note, and his fingers feel numb. Because the handwriting he can see-- not much, just a few letters-- is obviously Tommy's handwriting, messy but somehow still elegant. Familiar handwriting, from old notes and birthday cards. Handwriting he trusts.

He unfolds the paper and stares at the smudged ink. For a minute, his vision is too blurry to read.

"I'm sorry for ruining everything..."

"I'm sorry I made everyone hate me..."

"Tubbo, I love you, and I'm sorry..."

He can't read the rest. At least, not sober. Gods, he can't read Tommy's-- Tommy's *suicide note* without a drink or two or *ten* .

He sets the note down and gets up. "You need to leave," he says, voice cracking with the sob he's desperately fighting back. "I... I want to be alone."

Dream looks at him, green eyes sympathetic, unsmiling but kind. "Are you sure?" He asks, and by the fucking *stars*, he wishes he didn't ask.

Tubbo steps towards the counter. He opens the cabinet and stares into the very diminished collection of bottles, fingers curled around the countertop.

He snuffles, and tears pour down his cheeks. He can't draw a full breath, because the sobs are beginning, the awful choking sobs he always gets caught in when he's really upset.

"You-- you have to be wrong," he says, stepping away from the cabinet and slamming it shut. The bottles inside give a musical, manic clatter of glass, and it feels fitting. "Maybe he... *tried* , but he's not dead, there would be a message... Dream, I would-- I would *know* ."

Of course, he would know. He knows Tommy better than he knows himself, he would be able to *feel it* if Tommy was dead.

Maybe he did, maybe the disgusting feeling of misery and exhaustion he's felt for weeks now was a warning, maybe the way he's breaking now is that feeling.

His hand goes to his pocket, where he keeps the compass Ghostbur gave him, but-- well, of course it's not there. He broke it, a week or so ago, when he was particularly drunk, when he was particularly angry.

(Quackity found him sitting on his bedroom floor, sobbing, holding the broken glass and metal so tight it was cutting his hands.)

(He has new scars.)

"Tubbo, he's... he's definitely gone," Dream comes over and gently rests his hand on his shoulder. Tubbo feels so small, like he could disappear any moment, turning to nothing but particles and ash. He would be with Tommy, then. That would be good. "I looked *everywhere* for him. Checked everywhere on the server, hell, I even tried *leaving* ; he couldn't have gotten out, he's just... *dead* ."

He draws in a ragged breath, catching on his choking sobs. He clutches his shirt in fists at his chest. (He's still in his pajamas. That makes it worse, somehow.) "It just... it can't be that simple," he whimpers, his ears drooping. "He can't be gone, Dream."

His hand moves to rub his back as he cries, and he wants to melt into it, because that's exactly what

Tommy would always do when he cried. "I know, it's terrible..."

His heart properly shatters and he buries his face in his hands. He begins sobbing so violently his breath catches for a startling second, he chokes, cold water and colder ice sinking into his veins. His knees go weak and he slumps down to the floor, landing on his knees, his mouth covered by his hands as he sobs.

"I'm sorry," Dream murmurs, following him to the floor and gently holding him around the shoulders. "I'm so sorry."

He knows he shouldn't accept the comfort, that he shouldn't trust it, but gods, being held feels so *good*. He leans into his shoulder and whimpers out, "*It's my fault*."

"No, no," he soothes, patting his head. "It's not your fault, Tubbo. He was... he was really lonely, and just so *tired*..." He brings him in closer, adjusting himself so he's practically curled into his side. "He made that decision on his own. It's not your fault."

Tubbo sobs, burying his face in Dream's warm shoulder. "I... I should have never left him," he whines. He sounds pathetic and he doesn't care. "I missed him, I should have let him come back. He didn't *deserve*..."

"Tubbo..." he sighs, rubbing his back again. "You were justified. It was a stressful situation for all of us, you did what you could," he rests his head against his own, just avoiding his horns. "besides, considering what he did to you, what he *said to you*... I don't blame you for not wanting to see him."

Thinking of how Tommy was acting before everything began to unravel makes him curl into himself, into Dream, hugging himself tightly. "I..." he can't form any more words, simply crying into his friend(?)'s shoulder.

"Shhh, shhh..." Dream soothes, petting back his hair, rocking him back and forth as he holds him closer, almost on his lap. "It's okay, I know, it's horrible. I'm so sorry."

Tubbo uncurls his arms from around himself and instead wraps them around him tightly. He's warm and solid next to him, something to cling to as he begins to slip further into the cold, painful grief and shock.

"How did he--" he catches on a sob, "do you know how he did it?"

He shakes his head gently above his. "No... I'm sorry."

He digs his fingers into Dream's hoodie and swallows a *scream*. "I miss him," he sobs. "Why did I send him away? I'm terrible, I'm the w-worst..."

"Hey, hey..." He murmurs, rubbing his back again. "I told you it wasn't your fault, Tubbo. I know you regret it, but... he decided that on his own, it's not your fault."

He pulls him fully into his lap now, holding him close. He's reminded of the hours he spent curled up on his father's lap, curling up with his face pressed to his neck. Long, endless hours spent like that, as Schlatt read something or did some kind of work, as Tubbo cuddled up to him, half-asleep.

Dream rests his face against his hair, rocking him like he's a little kid. Tubbo doesn't fight it, not now, clinging to his warm form, resting his legs against his own, arms wrapping around his middle as he sobs into his chest. He feels frozen.

He feels so small, like he's the same small child that spent hours on his father's lap and not a teenage president with alcohol issues and grief up to his throat.

He cries like that for a while, clinging to him.

"It's *my* fault," he whimpers once more after a while, unable to help the guilt. "If I just let him stay, I could have done *anything* else..."

To his confusion and alarm, Dream pulls away from him, pushing him to the floor by himself.

Tubbo catches himself on his hands, thrown behind his body to hold himself up, legs splaying out crookedly as he tries to reorient himself.

He stands over him, a mean smile on his face. "You know what, Tubbo? I'm not going to keep lying to you just to make you feel better." He crosses his arms and leans over him, his eyes seeming to glow in the morning sunlight coming through the windows. "It *was* your fault. If you had cared enough to come visit him, maybe he wouldn't have *killed himself*."

He flinches; it's like Dream is voicing his awful, self-hating thoughts. "I... I *did* care, I..."

He grins wider, reaching down to grab his shirt and tug him into a proper sitting position. He's unbalanced, only held up by the hand in his shirt. He presses his hands against the floor shakily.

"You *killed* him," he says, voice harsh. "You pushed him away, you banished him, you abandoned him. And it's *your fault* he killed himself."

Tubbo whimpers, closing his eyes, dropping his head. He feels humiliated and the worst part is that he's right.

Dream lets go of him and he falls back onto the floor, sprawled out. The fall forces a soft cry from his throat and he curls up on his side, sobbing into his hands.

"You need to plan a funeral," he says, and the cold feeling finally takes him over. He doesn't stop sobbing, but a heavy numbness begins to sink into his limbs from his chest. "Don't you?"

He pulls his arms in closer, trying to warm himself while knowing it's impossible. "Y-yes, I do."

"And you have to tell everyone what happened. It'll be better coming from you, won't it?"

He nods against the floor. The side of his face is wet from tears. "I'll tell everyone."

"Good." Dream crouches next to him and pets his hair, pushing it around his horns, all his roughness fading as he offers the simple comfort. Tubbo doesn't want to lean into it, but he does.

After a few moments, he stands up and nudges him none-too-gently with his boot, in the stomach. It only hurts a little, but he still cries out about it. (Gods, he's a fucking crybaby.) "Get up. I think you need to get dressed and see some people."

He pulls himself up from the floor, wiping his wet face, his nose all snotty and his eyes stinging. "R-right."

Dream walks over to the table, and takes the last drink of his coffee. He sets the cup in the sink. "And maybe get yourself a drink."

He leaves.

Tubbo dries his face on his sleeve.

He pours himself a drink, downs it, and then pours another to drink as he walks to his bedroom to get dressed.

He needs to plan a funeral.

## Chapter End Notes

kinda fell off answering comments again ;; again, know i read all of them and think they're all lovely! i'm just stupid!

as always, if you want more snow au content/to watch jaybird (me) lose his mind, follow me on tumblr @hydrangeasheart!

the next chapter will be mostly sbi angst, im thinking :-)

## and some days i can't even trust myself

### Chapter Notes

(softly, with a lot of feeling) what the fuck am i doing

writing is hard. gonna be honest i've lowkey burnt myself out on this fic in particular a couple times, so im having to take it slow lately :-) but i'm doin good now!

i like this one a lot. it's mostly rambly character stuff again, but we get Plot at the end :-) and there's comfort! the boys get some rest!!! it's just some snippets of recovery time and talking about Stuff and Feelings. it's all about the Vibes,,,

title from little talks by of monsters and men

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno regrets getting a clock that audibly ticks for the loft.

It's driving him fucking insane. He's half-tempted to get up and break it to pieces with his bare hands, but he can't even sit up enough to grab his glasses.

He's trapped, lying on his back in bed, trapped in his heavy blankets, trapped staring at the ceiling, trapped listening to the tick-tock of the clock and he wants to *scream* .

Despite sleeping for most of the past few days, he's exhausted. Between the pain and the fever and his own dysfunctional brain, his thoughts are heavy and thick, like honey or slime or lava. Lava is a good comparison-- he feels too hot and it hasn't stopped for days.

He wants to get up. Why can't he get up? He can visualize himself getting up, getting out of bed. He can't go outside, Phil wouldn't let him (and oh, that fact makes him feel equal levels of anger and affection) but he can at least go sit next to the window or something. He's so hot, he just wants to lay down in the snow and stare at the sky.

He has these days, sometimes. Especially when he's stressed. And, well... considering the circumstances, considering the stress of the execution, the almost-overdose of potions, etcetera... it makes sense. The heaviness, the fever, how he's barely able to force himself to breathe. He's pressed to the mattress, unable to move.

Just because it makes sense doesn't mean he has to like it.

("Why are you still in bed? It's already two, get up and do your chores.")

"I can't get up. I... I'm really tired.")

(He got into the habit of lying about headaches to give himself time to work up the motivation to get up.)

He just wants to go outside and lay in the snow. It would be nice. Cold, against his still-fevered skin.

Or he could go downstairs and curl up against Phil's back, like he's done ever since he was little. Back then, he was small enough that he could put his face between his wings and hide in the soft feathers and his shirt, but now he's too tall for that. Now he can bury his face in his hair, though, which is almost as nice. He did that as a kid, too, though it was probably cuter then.

He'd never admit it to another living being, but he wishes he didn't grow up, sometimes. Part of him still wants to be small enough to curl up on his father's lap, his head tucked under his chin and his arms wrapped around him, his own scrawny arms wrapped around his middle. He wishes he had never grown up into the monster that he is, known by all as an agent of chaos and ruin.

(He was delirious, the feeling like a high he couldn't contain, memories and emotions and white-hot betrayal running through his veins.

"Do you want to be a hero, Tommy?" He could feel his mouth curled in a feral smile, his skull mask and crown crooked, blood staining his teeth. "*Then die like one!*")

*Monster*

*Deserved the execution*

*A bad person*

*No one loves you*

*Serve us*

Gain respect and praise

"Shut up, please," he mutters. "Stop being so rude, for once in your lives." (Are they even alive? What *are* they, really? They've said they're spirits, but is that even the truth?)

He turns on his side, curling up with Marnie against his chest. He presses his face to the top of her head; she smells like their laundry soap and blood. He needs to wash her. If he's able to get up today, maybe he will.

"Hey," Phil says, voice soft, as he comes up the ladder. He looks unlike himself in the soft, blue clothes Techno himself sewed for him. (Or, well, he does look like himself, but a much... younger version of himself. Phil in blue reminds him of their glory days.) "How're you feeling, Tech?"

Techno stares at the wall next to his father's head. "*I feel ...*" he blinks heavily when his voice comes out as piglike squealing.

Well, English isn't happening. He shakes his head instead.

Phil sits down next to him on the bed, resting a hand on his unharmed cheek. "I really wish I could say I learned anything from when you were small," he chuckles. "But I still can't understand a *bit* of piglin, kiddo."

He leans his face into his hand and snorts dismissively at both the statement and the nickname. He'd tried to teach him, a long time ago. Most human mouths just can't make the right sounds.

"Are you hungry?" He asks, rubbing his cheek with his thumb before dragging his hand up to pet his hair. "I think you can have another golden apple. It'll probably help your ribs, and I know you want to eat gold."

He can't help his chuckle, pressing his head up against his hand, craving the soft affection. "*I don't want to eat gold,*" he argues.

He pets his fingers through his hair. "Do you want one?"

He nods. Easy as ever, he pulls a golden apple from his pocket and hands it over. He forces himself into a sitting position and takes it, immediately sinking his teeth into the gilded flesh. His chest aches for only a moment, before the magic settles in and he *purrs* as it chases away the pain.

Phil laughs and ruffles his hair, like he's a kid again, and he melts into it. He's felt particularly needy for affection since the execution. He takes another bite of the apple and his shoulders slump, pleased.

God, magic always feels *so* much better after he's abstained from it for a while. Before the execution, he hadn't been severely injured in a while, and hadn't used any sort of magic, not even healing potions to clean wounds. He wishes he could feel this level of pleasant warmth all the time.

(Maybe that's why he used so many potions when he was younger.)

The hand on his head drags down and he brushes his knuckles across his cheek. "You need to shave," Phil observes, letting him lean against his hand.

Techno scrunches his face up at the idea. He... doesn't exactly trust his hands with a razor right now. He more than overexerted them the past few months; even holding the light apple hurts. "*Maybe you can do it*," he mumbles. He knows he should make an effort to actually speak a language Phil *understands*, but piglin just makes more sense right now. It's better than being fully nonverbal, he supposes.

"You should come downstairs," he says, still rubbing his cheek gently, and he can feel the roughness of his stubble against his fingers. It's an unfamiliar feeling; he keeps himself rather clean-shaven. "Get a change of scenery."

He shrugs, taking the last bite of the apple and turning the core over in his hands. His fingers are sticky; going downstairs would be ideal, since he needs to wash them now. But it's so much effort, and he's still so tired...

He shakes his head, pushing Phil aside slightly and moving to put his legs over the side of the bed. Even that takes a lot of effort; the magic helped, but even it has limits, and the bone-deep exhaustion he feels is too far for it to fix. He curls his hands around the edge of the mattress. His vision is kind of swimmy. Huh.

"Don't push yourself too much," Phil warns, resting a hand on his back and the other on his arm. "It's alright if you just want to stay in bed."

Techno groans, because he does. Staying in bed would be nice. But he hasn't really gotten up for very long at all in days. Yesterday was the most he moved around, and he only took a walk around the house and ate with his family.

He swallows. He isn't sure if he'll be able to get up and go downstairs. The idea of climbing the ladder sounds... like too much.

"Is... *is* it okay?" he asks, forcing his words into English. His tones are too low, too rough.

"If you stay in bed? Sure." Phil raises his hand to stroke his hair. "You need rest."

He frowns, eyes welling with tears. "Been in bed for days..."

"That's okay," he assures him, running his fingers through his hair before dropping his hand to scratch behind his ear. That's— not fair, because that just makes Techno feel like a kid and he



hates it because his stupid mind wants him to lean into it.

“I don’t know if you realize, Tech, but you went through something... pretty unimaginably horrible,” Phil’s voice is soft, and when he gently pulls Techno back into bed, he goes with. His fingers are sticky and his eyes are hot with tears and he feels so *small* but maybe that’s okay.

“You’ve been through a lot of horrible things, really. And you don’t *let* yourself feel the emotions from them, you don’t let yourself *rest*, so of course you’d need time after this.” Blunt nails continue to gently scratch behind his ear and he forces himself not to start purring, his face warm with embarrassment. “I don’t care if you stay in bed for a whole *week*, Techno. You deserve rest after all this time.”

He leans into the hand on his head and tries not to sob. He’s been crying so much lately, it seems like every little thing brings him to tears—he supposes that’s what happens when you completely emotionally exhaust yourself for... god, when was the last time he broke down like this? When he was eighteen?

As much as he wants to pretend he doesn’t feel these feelings, that these emotions don’t dig their claws into the soft parts of him and make a home there, he’s too tired to pretend anymore.

“I—I’ll come down and have dinner later,” Techno tries to bargain, pressing his head further into Phil’s hand to prompt more petting. “Just... need a little more sleep...”

“You don’t have to come down for dinner,” he says, now carding his fingers through his tangled hair. “But if you want that, I’ll come get you for dinner.”

He nods, eyes slipping shut, a low purr starting in his chest. “Can you... mm, can you help me wash my hair sometime?” he asks, words thick. “’s dirty again and... raisin’ my arms hurts...”

“Of course I can help you.” He strokes his thumb along his hairline, rubs a circle on his temple, and the purr only gets louder. “I’ll help you shave, too, if you want me to. I owe you for all the times you helped me.”

The idea makes him chuckle, more of a growl than anything. “Y’broke your right arm,” he mutters. “Your left hand is... too bad t’ shave with. Those would be dumb scars.”

“You have a scar from falling off the porch,” he points out, tapping the aforementioned scar. “I don’t wanna hear about dumb scars.”

“It was icy,” he defends, already falling asleep even as he speaks. “I slipped...”

He laughs and leans down to kiss his forehead. “Go to sleep, Tech. I’ll get you up in a little while.”

--

“Do you think he’ll start feeling better soon?” Tommy asks, something innocent in his voice, as he hops onto the edge of the porch railing and holds his arms and wings out as far as they can go as he walks along it.

Phil hums lightly, even as he braces himself to have to jump forward and catch him if he falls. His balance is going to be a mess with how his broken wing won’t extend fully, and he’s worried he’ll trip and go right to the snow, or worse, to the hard wood of the porch. “Soon enough. He’s... well, he’s not *just* dealing with the execution, y’know.”

His broken wing tries to stretch out further and his face creases with pain, only briefly. “Yeah. He’s got a lot on his mind.” He takes a few steps, keeping his balance remarkably well. “...does he really think he’s not good if he can’t help us?”

He blows out a slow breath and leans on his side of the railing. “Yeah. He does. He thinks he has to protect us.”

He stops, standing in the middle of the railing. He still has his arms and wings extended, and his eyebrows furrow. His eyes are shiny, and for a moment, he looks like the scared child Phil rescued all those years ago.

He steps off the rail and winces at the impact of his feet on the porch. He drops his arms to hug himself. “Has he *always* thought that?” He doesn’t sound upset, just curious. “Like, when he was younger?”

Phil sighs and rubs a hand over his eyes. He hasn’t been sleeping well. None of them have; Tommy’s nightmares have gotten worse, and every time he wakes, Techno is already awake, usually just laying on his side in bed and listlessly staring at the wall.

He glances up at the bright winter sky. “I think so. When he was really small... even though he wasn’t healthy, or really even strong enough to protect himself, let alone me...” he gives a bitter smile at the memory of an eight-year-old Techno brandishing a knife at a spider that had crept onto their land. “He took on that protector role. And... well, he’s developed a bit of a complex about it.”

Tommy leans on the wall next to him and reaches over to take his hand. His fingers are cold; they need to get him some gloves. “I don’t think I helped that at all,” he mutters, letting their fingers lace together. “Showing up like I did... he really did have to protect me, for a while...”

Phil glances over at him. He looks barely sixteen, right now, his eyes soft and tired, his hair loose around his face, his wings clean and fluffy with youth and sticking out of the slits in his jacket. He’s small and weak and he wants to carry him inside, keep him safe in their nest. He has no *right* to want that, but he does.

“You needed to be protected,” he says simply. “You were hurt and sick-- you still are-- and you needed someone to watch over you. Not to mention...” he trails off, the words feeling stuck.

He hasn’t quite been able to get killing Dream out of his head.

He has no love for the man; he hurt Techno and Tommy *badly* .

(Techno, especially.

Techno, standing on their porch, soaked in blood. His clothes were disheveled and his hair was undone, hanging down around his face in messy tangles.

His eyes were just... *empty* . No emotion except perhaps a dazed, deadened terror. In the flickering light of the porchlight, tears shined in them.

Wilbur had opened the door, and after what had to be a minute of the two of them staring in horror, Techno jerkily moved forward and collapsed against his brother’s chest. He wrapped his arms around him though he was too out of it to return the embrace, and pulled him inside.

It was... terrifying. Phil had never seen him so empty, so broken.

When they lead him to the bathroom to clean his wounds and help him into the bath, he pulled himself away from Wilbur's chest and rubbed his cheek, further smearing the blood. They offered to help him get clean, but he shook his head and closed himself into the room by himself.

"What happened to him?" Wilbur whispered, harsh with concern, his fingers wrapped tightly around Phil's arm. "He looks horrible. And all that blood-- did someone attack him?" Before he could answer, he kept talking, "What kind of question is that, someone definitely did--"

"Wil," he interrupted, taking his hand and gently squeezing it. "It's going to be fine. Techno's going to be fine, he's just... he got himself into a bit of trouble, I'm sure."

Techno wasn't *fine* .)

But there was something about the situation that was *deeply* unsettling. How he barely reacted to the stabbing, how he had his axe's blade pressed to Tommy's wing, the manic light in his green eyes. Killing him the same way he killed Wilbur didn't help, he's sure; it brought up that guilt, that grief...

He tightens his fingers around Tommy's own and swallows a sudden, desperate pulse of emotion. "We should go inside, it's starting to get cold." At least he's not lying; the wind has started to blow and it's almost frigid.

He shuffles in closer and nods. "Yeah, okay. Can we make hot cocoa again?"

"Sure."

He has to admit it; the domestic situation is nice. It reminds him of their old house, the one he originally built for himself and Kristen. (Even thinking her name hurts, sometimes. His ring feels heavy.) Even down to the low-crackling fire.

The whole thing is similar-- Tommy is sitting on the counter, kicking his feet lightly, his hair and wings all fluffy and almost glowing in the sunlight coming in the window. His smile is sweet and soft, as genuine as ever. He looks like the kid he took in all those years ago.

"Should we take some up to Techno?" he asks, watching as Phil stirs ingredients in the pan on the stove.

He hums. "Maybe. He might still be asleep."

He keeps kicking his feet, and rests his chin in his hands. "Is he healing at all?"

"He's healing fine. The rot is entirely gone, and the wound is finally closing up..." He gazes out the kitchen window and sighs a little. When he unwrapped his wound the last time, he was pleased to see how the hole in his chest was looking; red, still raw, but definitely more healed. "He'll be okay."

He glances at him, still smiling a little. "Yeah, he will."

--

Techno has never particularly minded his appearance. There were a few years in his youth that he disliked it, sure, but that was mainly dysphoria and the mortifying ordeal of being a teenager. As an adult, his feelings on his appearance are... neutral. Positive, even, at times.

He undresses in the bathroom, and looks at himself in the mirror.

He's lost weight. It's not a surprise, he really hasn't been eating enough, but it's a little startling to see how small his stomach has gotten, how he can actually rest a finger against the ridge of his hipbone. His muscles are less defined, too. He looks... more fragile than he has in a while.

(He was very happy when he started putting on weight, actually. He was nineteen when he finally got to a weight that was considered *healthy*. He was more than delighted when he looked in the mirror and realized he couldn't see the defined lines of his bones.)

He traces his index finger along the scar under his left pectoral. The one on the right is entirely gone, along with most of the skin on that side-- it's all just ragged scar tissue and still-healing wounds.

("Okay, I'm going to look in the mirror," he said hesitantly, dropping his shirt off to the side with his eyes closed. "I look... fine, right?")

He hadn't looked in the mirror since he got home and rested after his surgery. It took him a full week to heal, even with the specialty potions the surgeon and doctor had supplied him with. He was on pins and needles the whole goddamn time.

"Absolutely," Phil agreed. "You healed really well. Take a look."

Techno peeked one eye open, looking at his reflection. He opened his other eye and stared at himself. "...oh." He raised a hand and touched his *flat* chest, only marred by pink and red scars, no unnecessary fat or anything unpleasant.

If he cried about it, no one needs to know.)

His ribs are healing decently. The wound has finally closed, so he can't actively see his ribcage anymore when it's unwrapped. Small mercies, as always. It still hurts, he still can't quite draw in a full breath, but it's... getting better.

His ear healed fine. He was more than a little scared it wouldn't heal properly, but there's just a new notch in it. He lost one of his favorite earrings, but it's fine. He's fine.

He raises his hand to run it through his hair. Phil washed it out the previous day, and it... it was nice, having someone else wash his hair. The nice warmth of the water, the gentle lavender scent of his soap, the scrape of his nails on his scalp. They hadn't done that in a while.

He hasn't shaved yet, but he doesn't want to bother with it. He scratches his chin, annoyed by the scruff. Facial hair was affirming at first, until it got *itchy* and drove him insane.

He pulls on fresh clothes, being careful with his shirt. He's finally able to wear a shirt without bandages underneath, because he doesn't randomly start bleeding anymore. Sure, he can't be active yet, but he's... healing. Maybe he'll take a walk.

He grabs his brush and leaves the bathroom, walking with relative stability to the living area. Tommy is preening his wings, a set of annoyed chirps leaving his mouth as he fidgets with the misaligned feathers. The noises are sweet and familiar, from evenings in their old house, watching both of his brothers and their father clean their wings.

(Most nights, there was a bite of jealousy, of a pale envy, of a-- insecurity? about it. Because he was the only non-avian there, and it just-- it was weird, sometimes.)

It was less weird the infrequent times they let him help. Feathers are so soft...)

Phil is in the armchair, waiting patiently. Techno tries not to look eager when he comes over and sits down on the floor in front of him, handing over the hairbrush. He's always loved this.

As he starts brushing his hair, gently as to not pull too much, he starts humming, low and soft. Just like he did when he was smaller, sitting just like this, brushing out endlessly messier hair.

Techno can't be faulted for how he leans back into the strokes of the brush, eyes closing as his hair is detangled. He's been craving his childhood, he's well aware of that, but this is close enough to feel good.

--

*"Do you think we'll be friends forever?" Tubbo asks.*

*They're laying in the grass underneath the willow. Tommy is fidgeting with one of his puzzle toys, and Tubbo is weaving wildflowers into a crown as they lay there.*

*"I think so," Tommy says, turning the plastic pieces. He's laying on his back in the perfect position to not hurt his wings, a talent he's very proud of. "We're never gonna leave eachother, right?"*

*"I don't think we will," Tubbo sits up slightly to grab another flower. "Will we stay friends even if Dad and Wilbur break up?"*

*"Oh, absolutely," he replies, tilting his head back to see him better. "I'm staying with you. Even if they stop dating." He scrunches his face up when he grins. "Can't get rid of me that easy, Big T."*

*He giggles and smacks his cheek softly with his free hand. He squawks in response. "I don't wanna get rid of you!" he leans over to rest his head on his shoulder, snuggling in closer on the grass, avoiding crushing his wing. "I just worry sometimes. 'Cause they fight a lot and I don't wanna have to stop being your friend 'cause of them."*

*He shifts his arm to reach up and pet his hair. "They would have to pry me away from you," he says seriously. "If Schlatt makes you leave, I'll-- hm. I'll hide you somewhere."*

*"You'll kidnap me?" Tubbo asks, still laughing. "Oh, that's devious, Tommy. Where will I hide?"*

*"Hmmm... there's that creepy house in the woods," Tommy ponders, stroking his friend's hair. "Or that abandoned mineshaft, the one Techno says is too dangerous, but we both know that's bullshit," he laughs. "Or I'll just put you in the attic."*

*"My sneezing will give me away," he says dryly. "I don't think Dad will make me leave. He knows I'm happy here. I worry a lot, though."*

*He scrunches up his face again, turning to look at him. "It's gonna be fine, y'know," he leans over to press a kiss to his forehead, making him giggle again. "They'll get over whatever they're fighting about, they always do."*

*He shrugs against him, nestling better against his shoulder. "I guess. Just... promise me we'll always be best friends?"*

*He nods seriously, holding up a hand with his pinky raised. "Promise."*

*He smiles and raises his own hand, hooking their fingers together.*

-

Tommy wakes up on his side, snuggled up under his blankets, his arms feeling empty and his shoulder cold.

He frowns at the wall. It's... almost worse, having nice dreams. Because he's been having so many nightmares, for what feels like forever, and the softness is unfamiliar.

He realizes he's just crying a little, tears running down his cheeks and across his nose, dripping onto his pillow. He sniffles and raises a hand to scrub them away.

He misses Tubbo. More than he could ever voice. The two of them were so close, so happy. They trusted each other so much, and told each other everything. He just wants to hold him again and he misses how it felt when he curled up against him.

He actually just wants to be held, come to think of it.

He sits up in bed, stretching out his sleep-sore limbs. His wings stretch out, and the broken one almost stretches it's full length before it spasms with pain. He's been working with it, stretching it, trying to build up it's strength. It's almost entirely healed, according to Phil. Which is... good. Maybe he'll be able to fly again, soon.

He wants to fly. More than anything. More than he misses Tubbo, more than he loves his family, more than he fears Dream. He just-- wants to be in the air again, he wants to fly, he wants to get off the ground. Nothing can hurt him in the sky. He feels... happy, in the sky. He can breathe.

He sighs and rubs at his face with his palms, before pushing himself to the edge of his bed and deciding to look around the room.

He hadn't heard a thing, but apparently, Phil has been cleaning.

The living area is completely straightened up, even more so than Techno ever did. The books are all aligned neatly on the shelves with the various decorations, and the bookshelf itself has been dusted and the wood shined. There's a stack of blankets sitting in the armchair, folded incredibly neatly, and the newly-acquired couch has been moved, settled demurely against the wall.

Tommy blinks. That's... a little concerning.

The floor has been swept, he can tell when he puts his socked feet on the wooden boards. He glances at the kitchen, and yeah, Phil is silently yet determinedly cleaning. There's not a dish in the sink nor next to it drying, the counter shines, and he's scrubbing at the table right now.

He yawns. "Morning."

Phil blinks, looking up with a surprised expression. "Oh. Good morning, did I wake you?" He looks like he hasn't slept-- he's still in pajamas and his bathrobe, his hair drawn back into a low ponytail with golden pins in his bangs, but still a mess. His eyes are lined with exhaustion, and he can see where he's been picking at his wings, because the feathers nearest to his shoulders stick up unevenly.

(That's a habit they thankfully do *not* share when it comes to their wings.)

"No, I had a bad dream." Tommy pushes himself up off the bed and wanders to the kitchen, opening a cabinet to grab a glass. "You're stress cleaning again."

He pauses in his scrubbing for a minute, as if that hadn't dawned on him. "...maybe a little. I can't help it."

He laughs a little, pouring himself a glass of milk and leaning on the counter as he sips from it. "You could just nest like a *normal* bird, but nooo, you have to clean the whole house instead." His voice is rough from crying and sleep, and he still has sticky tear tracks on his face, but he wants to pick on his dad. He's a simple boy.

He laughs, a little faint, and finishes wiping off the table. "I do nest like a 'normal bird', actually. I just... also do the human version of nesting, sometimes." He sighs, setting down his cloth and rubbing his temple. "I've been cleaning all morning. I wasn't even thinking about it."

He tilts his head and frowns a little. He glances out the window-- by the light, it's probably barely seven. (Note to self: tell Techno to get a clock for the downstairs?) "When did you get up?"

He stays silent and carries a few dirty rags to the bathroom, to toss them into the laundry.

Tommy scowls. " *Dad* ."

Phil doesn't meet his eyes as he walks back into the kitchen, sitting down in one of the chairs with complete confidence in his posture. "What did you dream about?" He asks, keeping his voice light.

"You're dodging the issue," he replies, setting his glass down. "Philza Minecraft, you tell me when you woke up and started stress cleaning, or I'll go wake Techno and we'll *both* pester you."

He gets up from the table immediately, wings visibly twitching, and goes to the counter, opening the cabinet and grabbing the coffee grounds. "Tommy, I haven't really slept in *days* ." His tone betrays his pure exhaustion. "I'm trying to keep myself awake."

He goes quiet for a minute, as Phil starts a pot of coffee and leans on the counter, hands braced on the edge and his eyes on the kitchen window.

"...have you been having nightmares?" Tommy asks, hesitant. They all get them, of course, but... Phil hasn't ever talked about his. Techno really hasn't, either, but he knows that they're really bad.

He stares at the gently falling snow outside. "Yes."

He picks up his glass again, feeling the cool surface, and takes a small drink of his milk. "...about what?"

His shoulders slump, ruffled wings drooping, long feathers brushing the floor. "It's nothing you need to know about. It's..." He raises a hand to rub his face. "Just... stress dreams."

"Oh." He fiddles with his glass. "Are you sure? I'll listen, if you wanna talk about it." It's an unfamiliar situation, sure, hearing about his father's nightmares, but he owes him for all the times he and Techno have had to hear him ramble about his own.

He still doesn't look over at him, raising a hand to idly ruffle his own feathers, along his shoulder. "I... I dream about Wilbur a lot." His tone is mostly flat, but he can tell in how dragged-down he is that it hurts to say that. "My nightmares don't usually... make any sense. It's visuals. Symbolism." The pause he takes feels... meaningful. "But when I dream about... killing Wilbur, it's always so clear."

Tommy sets the glass down again, wrapping his arms around himself.

They haven't talked about this. They haven't breached this topic yet. They've dipped into almost everything else; the abandonment, Dream, Techno's numerous and varied traumas, and the other night Phil had even mentioned getting trapped in the End before.

But they haven't talked about Wilbur's death. It always felt... wrong. Tommy isn't ready to discuss it, he's fairly sure he's still processing some of it. He can't imagine Phil is handling it much better; he's the one who killed him, and he knows he didn't want to.

(Tommy had watched, staring, horrified, freshly respawned-- quick, too, god the quick ones are the worst-- as Phil stabbed through Wilbur's chest.

There was no scream, from *anyone* ; just a dead silence as the dust settled and they watched the broken former leader of the country slump, boneless, against his father.

The silence stretched for so long, far too long, and was broken by a sound that made Tommy's hair and feathers raise on instinct.

Phil *wailed* , wrapping his arms around Wilbur's body as they both fell to the ground. He clutched his eldest son in his arms, sword discarded, and began to sob, audible over the distance.)

"I'm sorry," he says quietly, stepping over gently to stand next to his father, hesitantly reaching out to bring him into an embrace. "It's... horrible." That's all he can offer, throat feeling tight.

He isn't surprised that Phil leans into him, resting his head against his shoulder, a low sigh leaving him. "It is," he murmurs. "I regret it. I wish-- I wish I could have talked him down, or..." He trails off.

Tommy runs his fingers over the ruffled feathers on his wings. He makes a tired chirpy sound and sinks further against him. "I don't think you could have," he admits. "He was... really far gone. You didn't see what he was like, before that..."

He shivers at the memory, the shouting, the manic light in his eyes by the glow of the campfire. Tubbo flinching when he spoke too loud, practically shouting. Techno's eyes lined with exhaustion as he tirelessly planned, his effortless betrayal that had to be in some way motivated by their older brother's spiral. The nervous twitch of Fundy's ears as his father ranted about his plans, his revenge. The resigned expression on Niki's face...

They stay very, very quiet for a while.

"What did you dream about?" Phil asks, voice a little hollow. "I want to think about something else."

Tommy fiddles with his feathers and leans his chin on top of his head, like he's seen Techno do every time they hug while standing.

"I dreamt about Tubbo," he murmurs. "It wasn't actually a bad dream... we were happy in it. It just... it made me upset, because I miss him, and seeing him when he arrested Techno--" Suddenly his throat is tight again, and he turns his face to press it against his hair. "I don't know what's going on with him, and it worries me..."

He hugs him closer, more securely, and he sinks into the embrace. "I worry about him too," he says. "He doesn't seem to be doing well, does he?"

"He was smiling about... th-that potion, pouring it in Techno's mouth like that." He's been replaying that moment for days now, trying to fit the maniacally smiling boy holding his brother by



the hair in with the gentle best friend he knew before... “I... I want to see him, but I’m scared to leave here at all.”

“If we can ever figure out a way to do it safely,” he says, rubbing a hand along his back. “I’ll go with you. I think he’ll be happy to see you.”

He exhales shakily. “Maybe. He was... really mad at me, before I got exiled. I... I did something mean, and then I got myself in trouble, so... he was really angry.” He hadn’t ever seen Tubbo that angry-- his blue-and-green eyes were full of a fiery light even as tears shimmered in them, and he was practically screaming at him after their fight.

“I don’t think he could ever be so mad that he doesn’t want to see you.”

He only hopes that’s true.

--

Ranboo winces as rain falls on his cheeks and ears, even with the hat he’s wearing and the hood he has pulled up on top of it.

He needs to get into Technoblade’s cabin. He feels like the news he was given is... going to be important to him and the people there.

Tubbo came over the afternoon before.

He shivers at the memory of his hollow, drunk, and detached voice. “ *Tommy is dead* .”

He tugs his coat in closer.

Tommy isn’t dead. He knows this for a fact-- a week ago, he slept on his lap and they talked about nightmares and dreams over breakfast before he left. Tommy is alive and-- maybe not well, but *alive* !

The statement still made his stomach drop. He couldn’t show his disbelief; he’s well aware that Tommy is in hiding, why else would he be staying with *Technoblade* of all people?

He wanted to admit it, though, because Tubbo looked so broken. He was visibly intoxicated, stumbling and flushed, and he had obviously been crying for hours. His voice was rough and he couldn’t speak too loudly.

The admission had been on the tip of Ranboo’s tongue; *he’s alive and he’s okay and I can take you to him* .

He knows it would be too risky, that he’d be destroying whatever tentative trust he had built with Techno and Philza and the trust he already has in Tommy. But Tubbo is his friend, too, and it *hurts* to see him grieving.

(Tubbo, sitting slumped over at Ranboo’s kitchen table, clutching a glass of water, sobbing quietly. “He’s dead,” he gasps between them. “Oh, Ranboo, he’s-- he’s gone--”)

He tugs his hood further over his head and walks faster, kicking up the puddles on the ground. It sinks into his pants, but he barely feels it. There’s-- there’s something *going on* . He knows there is. He isn’t sure what, but he has theories written down in his memory book, near the ones about Tommy’s broken wing.

Dream. It *has* to be to do with Dream. Tubbo mentioned that he first gave him the news, and Dream has been at the cabin trying to take him away, so obviously he's lying about Tommy being dead, but why? What would that *do* for him? He has no idea, other than maybe hurting him some more...

He cuts through between a few trees, head down. He knows something is wrong...

He just *knows* it.

---

Ghostbur floats over to the chair right next to Phil and clears his throat. "I have a question."

He doesn't look up from where he's cleaning his wings, straightening the feathers out with practiced motions. "Go ahead."

Ghostbur fidgets with his sleeves, feeling like a nervous child. He feels queasy and anxious, because he thinks this question is... going to inspire a *reaction*.

He already put it off a little; he wandered around the house for a bit, said hello to Techno (currently sitting in bed with a book, tired but definitely awake) and played outside with Tommy. He has to just bite the bullet and *ask*, but he doesn't want to upset Phil at all. He seems so down when he's around...

(Probably on account of the whole... killing him thing. Which he doesn't need to feel bad about! He wanted it! He was happy to die, then!)

"Do you know how to resurrect someone?" He asks, a little too quickly, the words all but falling from his mouth.

Phil looks up, his eyes wide, his lips parted. His expression is unreadable, but definitely negative.

He wraps his arms around himself and draws his own wings in, tucking the soft feathers against his sides. "Techno said you might know something..." He bites his tongue and looks at the floor. "Sorry."

"It's okay," he sighs. "Resurrection is just..." he pauses briefly, blinking. "...a sore subject for me. You didn't do anything wrong." He sighs and goes back to straightening up his wings. "I know how, yeah. It's... not a nice process."

"How do you do it?" Ghostbur asks, voice soft. "I want to know. I want-- I want..." He feels choked for a moment, and his chest aches where he was stabbed. He rests his hand over the wound and feels the dried blood on his sweater.

"...I want to be *alive* again."

## Chapter End Notes

this one's a little disjointed but we're getting into,,,, another plot event soon! :-)) hehe!

will try to get to comments!!! lets hope!!!



# if i make it through tonight everybody's gonna hear me out

## Chapter Notes

\*on the verge of tears\* ranboo my beloved

have a ranboo centric chapter!!! some fresh enderboy content for the masses!!! plot!!! things are happening!!! worldbuilding!!! ranboo talks to an enderman!!! there is ANGST!!!

warning for a really brief but pretty uncomfortable scene that implies some non-consensual touching (it's nothing graphic but it's got bad implications) things like references to child abuse, unsafe binding (don't be like mr beloved here; no bandages, no being super active while binding, and don't wear any binding stuff for too long! also don't have panic attacks if you can avoid it) and generally the same things that this whole au deals with lmao.

this chapter just. flowed from my fingers. it took only three days to write, including rewrites, which is pretty poggers if i say so myself. i made myself stop fucking with it before i hated it so if anything is weird... take it up with my lawyer (i don't have a lawyer)

title from touch-tone telephone by lemon demon. it felt appropriate!

Ranboo ducks his head as he walks briskly through the damp trees. He's taking the same path he did a week or so ago, helping Techno get home— why tamper with a way that works? Going through familiar places keeps his memory in check, too.

Something cracks behind him, and he lets out a sound of alarm, whipping around to the man lurking behind him, leaning on a tree casually.

“Where are you off to?” Dream’s voice is light with amusement. He has an axe in hand and he swings it lightly as he steps away from the tree.

Ranboo wraps his arms around himself and forces a harsh swallow, starting to walk again. “I’m exploring,” he says. “Why are you out here?” He pretends his voice isn’t shaking.

He steps up next to him, masked face tipped up to look at him. He can feel his eyes on him, and he looks away sharply. “Really?” He asks. “Exploring?”

He nods. “Mhm. I-I, uh...” he trails off, as he can feel Dream stare at his face, forcing him to walk slower as his instincts tell him to *freeze* . “I just wanna see more of the land, y’know, it’s pretty out here...”

“I suppose,” his voice is flat.

Being too close to Dream makes his instincts go crazy. He isn’t sure why, but the creepy-crawly feeling is familiar from... *other people* who made him feel unsafe. A quiet voice in his head is murmuring for him to *attack* , to *bite* , to *claw* . To *get away from the evil thing that only wants to hurt him* . To *find a quiet safe place and hide there* .

He digs his fingers against his leg. "What are you doing?" He asks, smiling even though his drive is to *bare his teeth* and then *bite* . *Kill* . ***Infect*** .

"Just keeping an eye on things," Dream says, serious. The axe sways as he moves his hand and he tries not to stare at it. "Making sure nothing is getting out of hand. You're not doing anything bad, though, are you?" He glances up, and he can feel his eyes on him.

*Get away get away get away stop looking at me **stop looking** bite him scratch him **run away!!!***

Ranboo swallows thickly. "Nope. I'm just exploring."

"Good!" Dream's voice has a decidedly dangerous edge to it. "You're too smart for any of that, aren't you? You don't want to hurt anyone or cause trouble?"

He moves in closer. His tail twitches in agitation and he digs his claws in against his arm now. "N-no. I don't."

"Good boy," he purrs, and his hand settles on his hip, under his jacket, only separated from the lightly-furred skin by his thin shirt, and he wants to *scream* . He completely stops dead in his tracks, trembling.

*Why is he touching me?*

***Bite him bite him--***

Abruptly, he starts squeezing his hip, fingers digging into his skin through his dress shirt. His fingers travel up , brushing his side, his ribs, the edge of his chest.

The touch is-- not good. Not good at *all* .

*He's gonna hurt me!*

Ranboo jolts forward, a screech leaving his mouth. Dream's fingers slip off of his hip and briefly catch his tail--

And then--

Then--

He's in the *snow* .

He blinks sluggishly, his brain feeling slow and fuzzy for a long moment.

He takes a step forward and the whole world spins. He can see particles dancing around in his vision.

He teleported. Okay.

*What do you know?* He prompts himself, stumbling back over snow banks into a tree line. He crashes into a trunk and grips his head.

*My name is-- I'm sixteen-- seventeen?-- and I'm looking for-- a cabin I need to get there he isn't dead **Dream is lying***

He pulls at his hair, sinking to the ground, avoiding the snow by inches. He tugs his mask down below his chin so he can breathe, accidentally pulling it from it's place around his ears altogether.

His chest feels tight with more than just the bandages binding it.

*My name is-- Ranboo? I'm sixteen- or seventeen? I need to get to the cabin he isn't dead Dream is lying this is wrong --*

His thoughts get stuck in that loop until his brain manages to catch back up.

His name is Ranboo, he's... a teenager (his true age is... a mystery, but he's *fairly* sure he's around sixteen?) and he's looking for Technoblade's cabin. Because Tommy isn't dead, Dream is definitely lying, and he wants to talk to Techno and Philza and Tommy himself about what to do with this information.

Right. He takes off his hat and runs his hands through his hair. His gloves are damp with sweat--  
*ew* .

A curious gurgle comes from his left and he turns his head sharply, nerves on a knife's edge.

An enderman is standing at his side, their head tilted towards him. They have an armful of flowers and dirt, and their tail sways mildly. They're a full-grown adult-- he can see the faint white freckles on their skin and the deep color of their eyes.

*"Are you alright, small one?"* They ask calmly.

Ranboo has to blink a few times and think *hard* to make the words make sense, even in his native language, but he nods. *"I'm okay,"* he assures them. *"Just scared myself."*

They give a low chitter and shake their head, turning their head towards the treeline. *"You're not supposed to teleport, enderling,"* their voice is wavering with amusement, and their long, clawed fingers fiddle with their flowers. *"Silly little thing. Too fragile, too hurt to handle it."*

He frowns and hugs his knees. *"Someone was going to hurt me if I didn't."* he informs, voice small as he wraps his tail around his legs. He doesn't know if Dream really would have, but the energy he got from him was wrong. He needs to get up and start walking again, but the comfort of one of his siblings nearby is undeniably wonderful. His thoughts are beginning to clear up. *"I was scared."*

*"Understandable, there are some very... troubling creatures here,"* they nod, dropping a hand to pat his head. Their claws ruffle his hair. He can feel gentle concern coming off of them in waves. *"Stay out of the snowfall, little one. It's going to start soon."* They adjust their armful of flowers and step away, letting out content *vwoops* .

He smiles a little at the affection, before stumbling up to his feet in realization. *"Wait! Can you help me? I just need to figure out how to get somewhere ..."* He looks around hurriedly, trying to spy a familiar landmark. *"I need to find a cabin, my... friend lives there and I need to speak to him. It's..."* He waves his hands vaguely. *"It looks very warm and bright, there's a horse stable outside, and a piglin hybrid lives there. Have you seen it?"*

The enderman chitters again and their tail flicks side-to-side as they ponder it. *"I've seen the hybrid you're speaking of. His scent is all over this area, though he hasn't been around as of late."* He can't tell if they mean that negatively. He did notice how Techno smells; like spruce wood and lavender and something harsher, more bitter, tinted with a not-insignificant amount of blood. Though that could have been from the execution. *"Head further north until you find the village, and then east from there. The cabin is that way. Be safe, little brother."*

They stride out into the snow, feet sinking lightly into the cover, before teleporting away with a familiar sound.

He feels inappropriately lonely without their company.

He sighs, tugging his coat and hat back into a presentable and covering state, along with pulling on his mask. He needs to get going-- it's already mid-afternoon, and the sun is sinking fast with the season.

He sighs and sets out.

--

Of course, it starts snowing within the hour, reducing his already-poor visibility.

"Why didn't I bring my umbrella... or a better hat..." Ranboo mutters to himself, tugging his hat further down to try and cover his ears. He's drawn his tail underneath his coat to keep it from getting wet, wrapping it loosely around his waist. There's no way to avoid getting his pants and gloves wet, though. Ugh.

But he knows this area-- he's near the village. He stumbled across it one of the first times he came out here, and it's surprisingly bustling for a place situated in the tundra. He can't imagine many people on the server wander this far, so it's interesting.

He knows better than to stray too close, though. His appearance and nature draw only trouble from villages, not the mention how iron golems react to him. He shivers. If he was less visibly nonhuman, he'd just cut through the town, but just a peek at his skin will set them off.

He skirts the edge of it, treading over the snow, sticking under trees or the edges of buildings when he can. The falling flakes are still fairly light for now, so it isn't incredibly painful, but he still doesn't like the itching feeling. He's going to have to treat his skin as soon as he gets home, or maybe as soon as he gets to the cabin. He carries potions just for this reason.

A pair of children run out onto the empty snow in front of him, just outside the farthest house. Ranboo freezes, watching them. Children are unpredictable; sometimes they find him cool and won't raise any alarm, but often they think he's scary and run away to their parents, usually causing trouble. It's been that way since he himself was a child. (He still is, technically, but... well. Being six and being sixteen are very different states of being.)

(When he was still small, maybe around nine, and very much on his own, a pair of older boys-- twelve or so-- found out where he was hiding, in an abandoned building at the outskirts of a village. He was incredibly small then, scrawny from malnourishment and the frequent injuries he got from his impaired balance. They easily overtook him and dragged him away.

The only reason the memory has stuck with him is that they dragged him into the center of town and nearly allowed the village's golem to rip him to shreds, claiming they found a monster. He only got away because he can teleport, and even then it was a close call-- he ended up breaking his arm badly.)

The children don't notice him, though, and run back into the cover of the village's buildings. He breathes out lightly and keeps walking, hurrying past where they ran back into town, his head down.

His fingers twitch towards his sword when he hears someone screech with laughter.

He's been unusually on edge because of his encounter with Dream.

He doesn't know what it is about him, but something is-- just *wrong* about him. He's fairly perceptive of things about people. He's sure it's something to do with his nature, but he tends to feel a lot of how other people are feeling, for better or for worse.

(Being around Tubbo while he's grieving is... a little miserable, if he's being honest. He not only has to deal with his friend seeming so broken, but he has to *feel* a portion of his emotions as well. They're sickening, dark things, rage and grief and an all-consuming desire to *hurt someone* . He's not sure *who* he wants to hurt, but there are violent feelings underneath all of it, thick as magma and twice as dangerous.)

But with Dream... he can't feel *anything* . It's like he's blocked off from knowing whatever the man is feeling, and it's... weird. Uncomfortable. He's so *used* to getting a glimpse into how people are feeling like that, getting a read on how conversations are affecting someone, that having that wall there is just-- strange and *unsettling* . It feels like something is *stopping* him.

He shakes his head, trying to dismiss the feeling. No use dwelling on it when he has somewhere to be.

The village is well behind him, and the snow is falling thicker now. He's getting closer to the cabin, he's sure, he recognizes this area vaguely from his trip through the snow with Techno. He's no stranger to getting burns from water and ice, but getting caught in a storm like the one he had to avoid a week ago would be a disaster.

He's not interested in dying from getting too wet and melting everywhere. He did that once, and it took him a week and a half to respawn, and then a good few days to feel stable enough to get out of bed.

He breaks into a light run, trying not to kick up too much snow. He's cold, but keeping in motion like this is keeping him from feeling miserable. He can't full out sprint, definitely not in the snow and not while he's binding, but this light jog works.

If he wasn't essentially allergic to water, he'd like this area. It's nice. Quiet. The snow deadens sounds, and it's... it's calming.

In situations like this, he really wishes that he could teleport more freely. He's never been able to do it without consequence; for some reason, the action that comes freely to his full-blooded siblings, and even the few other ender hybrids he's met, makes his memories get even more scrambled.

This time, it went pretty well, and he still had to sit there for a few minutes forcing his thoughts and memories back into line. Most of the time, it takes longer. Once, it took him an hour just to remember his *name* , let alone what he was doing.

Not paying attention to his surroundings, he trips over a rock hidden under the snow and has to muffle the screech that wants to leave him in his gloved palm and his mask. He catches his balance just before he falls face-first into the white, but he twisted his ankle and it *aches* . He kicked up snow onto his pants too, high enough to burn his right thigh. Ow.

To make matters worse, he hears the draw of a sword, and footsteps cracking through the crust of the snow. Someone is behind him, he can feel their eyes on his back.

"Who are you?"



*He knows that voice!*

His lips twitch into a nervous smile and he turns around.

Silhouetted against the darkening sky and the white snow, Philza looks somehow both imposing and small, wings tucked in against his back and his face illuminated by only the fading sun, his expression serious, heavy with stress. His hair is sticking out at odd angles underneath his hat, and his clothes are coated with snow. He's tense, battle-ready, and his sword gleams, wickedly sharp.

"Hi," Ranboo says, waving a hand and using the other to tug his mask down enough to show his skin, mostly hidden by his clothing. He smiles weakly. "It's just me."

Phil's face lightens slightly and he smiles back. "Oh. Hey, Ranboo. I didn't recognize you." He sheathes his sword and steps in a little closer. "What are you doing out here, mate? It's late already, and it's close to storming."

He pulls his mask up again, covering his nose against the wind chill. "I've got... uh, news for all of you." He swallows nervously. "It's kind of... important. I think." A clump of snow comes off of the tree above them and falls down over one of his shoulders. It immediately begins soaking through his coat and he winces, trying to brush it off. "...and also I need to go inside before I get hurt." He's already hurt, but he doesn't need to *share* that.

He laughs, the sound oddly... comforting. The tenseness in his shoulders and emotions fades and he adjusts his own coat. "C'mon, follow me. It's not far."

Ranboo does as told, following along. Phil walks through the snow with a frankly obscene amount of grace, seemingly unbothered by how cold it is or how thick the cover is. He's a bit jealous, but mostly just impressed. Even without his freshly-twisted ankle and itchy-stinging skin, he'd be stumbling.

They walk quietly, for the wind is beginning to howl and neither of them could be heard anyway. Within minutes he can see the lights of the cabin, sending golden light all over the snow. The windows are all shuttered and the horse in the stable is awake; he watches them pass with surprisingly intelligent eyes. It makes Ranboo shiver, and he figures it would even without the cold.

They walk up the porch steps, and take a minute to stomp the ice off their boots and pants. Most of it has just melted onto him, but a good portion has re-frozen into clumps. Great. He bats at it with his removed gloves, but it doesn't come off.

Phil holds the door open for him, and he tries not to let out a happy purr about how warm it feels inside. He didn't even realize he was shivering!

"You're back!" Tommy says, sitting on the kitchen counter. He looks like he just woke up-- his hair sticks up in clumps and his clothes are disheveled. "And you... found Ranboo?"

"Hi," he waves, tucking his gloves and mask into his coat pocket and taking it off. He grabs the potion and a clean cloth from another pocket, aiming to at least *kind of* treat his legs.

Techno is sitting in the armchair, expression drowsy, but his dark eyes sharpen at the sight of him. "What're you doin' here?" he asks, somehow both sleepy and intimidating.

"I've got news," he says, a little hesitant, obediently hanging up his coat and setting aside his boots when Phil directs him to. His wet pants are sticking to his legs and his socks are damp, but at least his shirt and undershirt and bandages are mostly dry. "It's kind of... bad, I think? I don't know..."

It's about Tommy."

"How can it be about me? I've been here for months now." Tommy kicks his feet lightly off the edge of the counter.

Ranboo shakes his head after he pulls his hat off, freeing his hair and ears. His tail sways, equally freed from being inside his jacket. "Well..." Anxiety curls in his stomach and he picks at his paws. "Um. Dream has been saying you're... *dead*. Tubbo seems to believe him, and... so does everyone else."

The sudden shock of alarm from everyone in the room makes him flinch, a small gurgle leaving him.

"That bastard *knows* I'm not dead," Tommy says, bitter, angry energy flowing off of him. His wings have all but snapped out, only stopped by how small the kitchen is. "What is he doing, telling everyone I'm dead? E-even Tubbo?"

"Can't be good, whatever he's doin'," Techno mumbles, sitting up further in his chair and looking over at him. His eyes are bleary, and he has his glasses pushed up into his hair. "How did you find out?"

Ranboo shivers at the memory and crosses his arms. Phil gestures towards the fire and he goes to sit down in front of it, folding his legs below himself before feeling the ice on his pants and having to move his legs. (No water burns on his butt, thank you.) He sits with his legs stretched out in front of the fire instead. "Tubbo came over and told me. He was a mess, he was crying and really, *really* drunk--"

"Drunk?" Tommy echoes. "He told me he wouldn't ever drink. His dad-- his dad was an alcoholic." His wings draw in close again, curving slightly around his body. His eyes are wide and look oddly pale.

He frowns. Of course Tommy wouldn't know-- from that he's heard, Tubbo started drinking *after* he was exiled. "He's been drinking for a while. He's really stressed out, s-so I guess he just... started doing that to cope." He's not going to mention how many times he's heard him crying in his office, nor the ghost of Schlatt who mocks him for his addiction. (He's still not sure if that one is *real*, actually.)

"How long ago did you learn this?" Phil asks, suddenly at his side and draping a towel around his shoulders. He valiantly doesn't flinch when his hands brush his sore arms.

He takes it off his shoulders and uses it to pat his feet and legs dry after pulling his socks off, or at least the parts he can reach with his pants pulled up. "Yesterday."

"Tommy left wherever he was exiled to three months ago," Techno says, pulling his glasses from his hair and wincing as he has to pry them loose from a tangle of pink strands. "So he's been lyin' about how he's doin' ever since then, and just now chose to tell everyone he's 'dead'." He sets his glasses on his nose and adjusts them. "There's gotta be some strategic advantage to that. I..." he rubs his temples. "Is there anythin' else he said about it?"

He continues gently drying off the fur on his legs. It stings, with the burns under the light coat, but it's not too bad. He's had much worse. "Um, no...? He said Dream just told him that Tommy died..." He stretches out his clawed foot and dries it, ignoring the awful tinge of pain in his ankle. "I could ask him for more, but..." He's not going to say that he doesn't *want* to ask. Tubbo scares him most of the time, and even more when he's drunk.

(Quackity let out a harsh breath as he closed the office door behind him. “You guys might wanna leave him alone for a bit.”

“Why?” Fundy asked, whiskers twitching.

“He’s... really drunk,” he looked oddly pale, a bit sweaty, his yellow wings drawn in close. “Like, it’s pretty dangerous for you two to be around him, I think. It’s nothing kids need to see.”

“You’re only three years older than me,” Ranboo pointed out faintly, eyes on the closed door, tail flicking with agitation. He can *taste* the anger coming out of that room. It’s bitter, disgusting. He has nothing to compare it to, but it’s horrible.

“And I don’t want to see it either.” Quackity shook his head, taking off his beanie to run his hands through his hair. “Let’s take the day off, go do something fun.”

“Sure.”

“Okay.”

Ranboo could taste the anger for *hours*.)

“You should,” Techno says, ruffling his own hair and leaning forward with his elbows on his legs. He winces and adjusts his position. “I... I can’t see what Dream’s angle is. Tommy’s already... out of the way, so whatever plan he’s tryin’ to pull off over there wouldn’t be interrupted by him causin’ chaos--”

“Hey!”

He ignores the outburst. “So obviously he still needs him for somethin’. I can’t... did he ever say *why* he was keepin’ ya with him, Tommy?” His words are oddly slurred, and his voice seems even deeper than usual.

“No...” Tommy trails off. “I mean, he said he was keeping me away from people, so I couldn’t... *hurt* anyone.” He hops off the counter and comes over, settling on a small couch next to Phil, who takes his hand when he sits down next to him. “But I don’t think that’s the truth. He liked... hurting *me* way too much for that to be the truth.”

Ranboo glances over at him, and he looks terribly small, curling his arms around himself, wings drawn in close, head down.

Shame curls in his gut; he obviously made him feel like this, bringing all of this up... “I’m sorry,” he mumbles without thinking. “I know talking about this is hard...”

“I’m fine,” he says quietly. “It’s hard, but we need to figure out what he’s doing, right?”

Phil releases his hand to rub his back, presumably between his wings, and he seems to get even smaller. Ranboo stares at the floor, feeling guilt and shame and all kinds of horrible emotions. He’s not sure how much of it is his own, but it doesn’t matter.

“If he still needs Tommy for some kind of plan, it’d probably be a good idea for him to get everyone to get used to him bein’... completely gone, right?” Techno is staring into the fire, running his claws compulsively along a scar on his arm. “But what kind of plan could he have, other than inflictin’ more pain on him? I mean, he already *broke* his wing--”

“*Techno!*” Phil scolds, a little too sharply.

Tommy flinches. Techno looks over at him quickly, ears drooping.

Ranboo inspects his hands without blinking or moving.

He was right. Tommy's wing is broken.

And Dream *broke* it. For some reason, that-- that pulls at him. Why does it *pull* at him, like tugging a book-- a *memory*-- from a shelf?

(And why do his tail and back suddenly *hurt*, more so than just... normal?)

"...sorry," Techno's voice is suddenly soft, underlined with a growl. "I didn't-- wasn't thinkin'. Sorry."

Phil runs his hand through his hair, pulling it out of its ponytail. "I'm not mad," he says, still a bit too sharp. "You just--"

"I hadn't *told him*," Tommy whispers. "Ranboo didn't *know* that, Techno."

He makes a sound like he was punched. "Ah."

Ranboo wraps his arms around himself, pulling his legs up, digging his claws into the damp fur on his shins. "I'll just forget it," he whispers, just as soft as his friend. He's lying; this information has already firmly placed itself in long-term memory, he's sure. "We can pretend I didn't hear it."

He can feel Tommy's fear, his misery, the panic that edges at his mind. It's so strong he can almost taste it, salty and bitter and disgusting.

*End*, he wants to cry. He can feel the tears, welling along his lashes and stinging his skin where they threaten to fall.

Heavy silence settles. The wind howls like something undead, and something clatters on the porch steps. A stray, maybe.

"It's okay," Tommy says. When he looks up, he can see that he's curled up with his arms over his chest and his wings close to his body. "You woulda found out sooner or later, I guess."

Ranboo snuffles, and tears run down his cheeks, tracing the lines of his faint scars. "Still. You should have gotten to tell me when you were r-ready. That-- that had to be really bad for you." His back aches all over, muscle-deep pain that he can't explain. "That's why your wing i-is all crooked, isn't it?"

He lets out a miserable sounding little chirp. "Y-yeah. He broke it a while ago, and even though it's healing, it's... still crooked." He curls up even smaller, turning to rest his face against his father's shoulder.

Techno clears his throat. "I'm sorry. 'S my fault, shoulda thought about what company we have before talkin'." He runs his hands through his hair. He's never seen it down like this, even after the execution it was in a loose ponytail. It's impressively curly and looks... very soft in the firelight. For some reason, he itches to run his paws through it.

"It's fine," Tommy says. "Can we keep-- can we talk about whatever Dream's planning some more? O-or something, I..."

"Of course," Phil's voice has a note of gentle yet insistent firmness, and he briefly rubs Tommy's

back. “So, about whatever Dream’s plan must be. If he needs Tommy for it, maybe there’s something about him that’s important.” He glances at his son with a light smile. “Do you have any powers we haven’t figured out yet?”

Techno snorts a laugh. Ranboo forces a smile, rubbing tears off his cheeks with his sleeve.

Tommy giggles a little and rubs his own eyes. “Nope, just normal avian stuff... I don’t know why he wants to keep me away from people so much. I mean, I’ve caused a lot of trouble, but I-I didn’t do anything really... *bad* .”

“You really haven’t,” Techno says, voice getting slower. His eyes are getting heavy. He’s still recovering, he supposes. “He’s delusional, and not in a way that can be fixed. He has a god complex and he likes hurtin’ people for fun.” He rolls his eyes. “I can’t figure out why he’d want to keep *you* away from people.”

Ranboo wets the cloth with the potion— a mix of mostly healing with a bit of regen to help with the scarring— and dabs at the worse burns on his legs. “There’s something... *wrong* with him,” he whispers, remembering the strange, blank feeling he gets when around Dream. “I don’t know what it is. Is he human?” His tail flicks against the floor.

“No,” he says, suddenly very serious, not sleepy at all. “No clue *what* he is, but he isn’t human. I thought he was, when we were younger, but...”

There’s so much implied in those words. The nostalgia is almost as bitter as Tommy’s fear. He’s tugging at his hair lightly, glasses unsettled.

He looks... smaller. Before the execution, whenever he saw him, he looked so big, so larger than life. Now there seems to be less of him.

*It was your fault. You helped.*

He dismisses the voice; he doesn’t need extra hatred right now, he’s already full of it. “I wonder what he is, then,” he murmurs. “He’s something *strong* . I can feel it, when I’m around him...”

The power that comes off of him is... choking, really. He can’t imagine being near him for too long without feeling trapped. Maybe that’s why his instincts tell him to run and hide when he sees that damn mask-- even his enderman brain knows that whatever *Dream* is, he’s something to avoid.

“I’ve been around pureblooded demons before,” Phil says, quietly distracted, “and Dream feels a bit like that. Not exactly, but similar enough...” He trails off. “I don’t know. He’s something I don’t think any of us understand.”

Something about his voice is... wrong. He’s been feeling a low kind of... negativity coming off of him ever since he ran into him in the snow. Something dark that he’s *barely* keeping to himself. He feels the same kind of strange power coming off of him, honestly, but less... menacing than Dream. Phil is *powerful* , maybe not *mortal* either, but with... some kind of *tempering* to it.

“Does it really matter *what* he is? I mean, he can *die* , right?” Tommy fiddles with his hands, pressing at his knuckles and flexing them lightly. “We can just kill him and save the rest of us a lot of pain.”

Techno lets out a low, annoyed growl. Ranboo’s tail flicks again at the sound, a little animal part of him saying to avoid *him* , too. “I’ve killed Dream at least *ten* times, with *full intent* . He’s still kickin’ around despite all of that, so no, I’m not sure if he *can* die.” He’s tapping his foot, clad in

warm-looking socks. (They're patterned with little crowns, which is a detail he thinks is kinda... sweet.)

A long silence settles again.

Phil gets up and walks to the kitchen, turning his back on them, audibly fiddling with things on the counter.

The dark feeling is suddenly much *stronger*, and Ranboo curls into himself. It's just as choking as being around Dream, and he wants to cry again out of nowhere. He doesn't understand it, he *never* understands the feelings, not fully at least, but they at least have a form of some kind.

He doesn't want to keep thinking about it. After wiping the cloth over his stinging cheeks, he wraps his arms around his sore legs and lets his tail rest around his ankles, his chin on his knees.

"How have you killed him *ten times*?" Tommy asks, somewhere between horror and awe. "You... three lives is how it *works*."

"I don't know how," Techno's voice is tinged with annoyance, and he slumps back in the chair. There's a nearly-healed scar on his jaw, he notes, probably from the execution. He looks and feels so tired and hurt. "That's just how it's been ever since... I don't know, I was fifteen when I noticed him being something different."

It feels wrong.

Everything feels wrong, it's suddenly piling on him, and he hugs himself tighter.

He usually feels suffocated in L'manberg, for a lot of reasons. He can't do a lot of things there; he can't stand up straight because his height is intimidating, he can't make any ender noises, let alone speak the language (never, *never*, Tubbo gets violent and Quackity mocks him when he slips up or is too tired for English) and he really just... can't show any nonhuman traits.

Well, *nonhuman* ones are fine-- tail flicking, his ears, his eyes going from slits to rounded when he's excited.

Any sort of monster trait isn't *allowed*. He makes eye contact even though his instincts go insane at the sensation of eyes on his own. No ender sounds, no gurgles or growls or screeches or anything. He keeps his claws hidden. He tries to keep his issues with water to himself unless they're relevant. He doesn't mention his vague memories of the End, restraining them to his memory book. He doesn't talk to his siblings, and he never mentions his ability to do so. He resists the urge to protectively gather his friends into his house and keep them safe whenever anything bad happens, like his siblings would do for him when he was small and in danger.

He just... acts like he's *normal*. Harmless. Because he really is, he won't hurt any of them. He doesn't like hurting anyone, not even mobs. He's-- he's not... *dangerous*. He swears he isn't.

Here, he feels a little less pressured. He spends no more than a few hours here, a few times a week, but he feels less like he's being restrained. Maybe it's things like how Tommy doesn't hesitate to groom his wings in his presence, or how Techno is very visibly not human and monstrous to boot-- quiet growls, amused snorts, the annoyed flick of his tail and ears, his dagger-sharp tusks, the gold all over the home.

But right now, he feels so small, like if he makes any noise he'll make them mad at him. Pain and exhaustion and anger rolls off of Techno. Tommy's panic still bites at the air like a cloud of smoke. And the dark something that Phil feels only makes his head hurt.

He shouldn't have come here. He just caused more pain for people he cares far more about than he should. He doesn't know why, but he already cares about them. Maybe it's guilt; maybe it's nothing at all.

What did he think he would accomplish, telling them about Dream's obvious lies? They were doing just fine out here, they would have figured it out themselves. Dream probably doesn't even have some master plan, he might just be messing with them. He does that, doesn't he? Stressing themselves out about figuring it out isn't necessary. He's just making things harder on them, on the people he's already caused so much trouble for. Techno is obviously still in recovery from the execution, Phil seems stressed, and Tommy... Tommy is miserable, he can taste it.

He raises his hand to scratch at the thin skin around his horns, fingers digging through the strands of his hair. He's been thinking about how Tommy said the two sides of his hair have different textures a lot. He can't feel it, but he supposes normal fingers are more sensitive to textures. He can't imagine being more sensitive than he already is, really.

He's not used to scratching with bare claws. It doesn't draw blood, but it stings like his burns and does nothing to help the awful feelings he's absorbing and internalizing and clutching inside of him.

He shouldn't have come here. He should have stayed at home. They're going to know he was gone-- *oh, by the stars, they're going to know!* Tubbo is surely going to visit him again after how horrible yesterday's visit was, likely craving comfort, and he isn't there! He's going to just get himself in trouble! Tubbo is going to *stare* at him again or *accidentally* pour water on him or just look at him with such *rejection* and *reproach* and *anger* or maybe he'll just slap him like he hit Fundy the other day--

("I said get out of my-- way.")

"Ow! What was that for?!"

"Seriously, Tubbo, that was uncalled for--"

"Shut up, both of you!")

"Ranboo?" Tommy's voice interrupts his thoughts.

Ranboo jolts, digging the sharpness of his nails into his scalp and whimpering softly at the shock of pain.

He's kneeling next to him, frowning, wings extended slightly as if trying to block him from Techno and Phil, who are quietly speaking at the kitchen counter.

He's suddenly aware of the fresh tears stinging his skin, the slight dampness on his claws-- he did draw blood...-- and how he's trembling, tense as a tripwire.

"Are you okay?" He asks softly, a hand hovering over his arm. "Can I touch you?"

He swallows, mouth dry, and nods jerkily, chirping without thinking when his nails move against the small cut he must have inflicted.

Tommy's hand settles against his arm and tugs his hand away from his head. Without showing any sign of disgust at the green blood on his black claws, he slides their fingers together and holds him securely. "It's okay," he soothes, "try and take a deep breath."

The feeling of being comforted by the very person he *just* upset is bizarre. He wipes the tears off his cheek with his free hand and drags in a breath. It hurts his ribs, his bandages are too tight. He wishes he could take them off, but-- not now. Not now.

“Yeah, that’s good,” he praises, smiling. He isn’t looking him in the eyes, setting them on his shoulder, and it feels-- *stars* it feels so good not to be forced to make eye contact. Tommy has never forced it, and the few times he’s done it, he’s broken it quickly. “Try again, it’ll help you calm down.”

Ranboo lets out an embarrassed whine at the comfort, because it feels good, but he’s so *guilty* because he upset him, he should be mad at him, he brought up Dream and told him about Tubbo’s drinking and learned about how his wing was broken even though he didn’t want to share it, and *just made him upset*, he should be *angry* !

He talks him through breathing slower, deeper. His voice is soft and comforting and he’s reminded of something but he’s not sure what.

After a few horrible minutes, his chest aching, his mouth dry and with a horrible taste on his tongue, he’s slumped over on his friend’s shoulder. His arms are draped around his shoulders, and his own are wrapped around his middle. His cheeks are stinging with involuntary tears, and his now-slow breathing occasionally hitches with quiet vwoops.

“You feeling better?” Tommy asks, fiddling with his hair. “You’re still shaking.”

Ranboo mumbles, not wanting to talk, but he owes him an answer for comforting him and being so nice even after he upset him. ““m okay. Thank you.”

“No problem,” he says lightly, now running his fingers through his hair. It’s a bit messy from being under his hat and having been messed with while he was... panicking, he supposes. “Can I clean where you scratched yourself, or do you wanna do it?”

He winces at the reminder, pain stinging the injury. “You can do it. Just-- no water, please.”

“Why would I use water? You’re an enderman hybrid, I’m not *dumb* .” He gets up from the floor, tugging him along with. He glances over at the adults. “All the medical stuff’s in the bathroom, right, Tech?”

Techno doesn’t even look over. “Yeah, under the sink.” His tail flicks as he goes back to the conversation he’s having with Phil.

Tommy leads him into the small bathroom, gently guiding him to sit on the closed toilet and digging in the cabinet under the sink.

Ranboo wraps his arms around himself and slumps down.

He feels horrible for making him upset, for making him comfort him, for making him talk out of a stupid panic attack because he started thinking too much, for making him fix a *stupid* injury he caused himself.

He’s *afraid* , if he’s being honest. Tommy is *nice* , but so is Tubbo. And so is Quackity. And so was Dream. And so were the other people who he thought cared for him.

(He made one of his old parents mad, once. He has no idea what he did-- he doesn’t remember-- but the woman had been completely *enraged* at him, slapping him across the face so hard his sharp teeth cut deeply into his inner cheek.)



He hums quietly, as he uses a small white cloth to clean the scratch on his head. It's just at the base of his horn, on very tender skin, and he tries not to flinch away at the feeling.

"...why aren't you mad?" he whispers, as he treats the wound with healing potion.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

He hugs himself, tugging absently at his shirt. He feels restrained and small, but it's not a new feeling. "I made you sad and you had to comfort me a-and I hurt myself, so why aren't you angry with me?"

He pauses, before patting the wound dry and pulling away. He's frowning, and his wings droop slightly. "I'm not gonna be mad at you for accidentally making me upset or anything, Ranboo. That'd be... really rude of me. And I'm definitely not gonna be mad at you for hurting yourself while having a panic attack." He scratches his wrist absently, and suddenly he feels so horribly connected to him.

"...so you're not going to yell at me or hit me or something?" He tries, hesitant. The alarmed look on Tommy's face makes him backtrack. "O-of course you're not! I shouldn't have a-asked, *of course* you're not going to--"

He grabs his hands and firmly intertwines their fingers. Ranboo chirps at the skin-on-skin contact.

He usually wears his gloves everywhere, because his hands get cold and he doesn't like touching Bad Things (like that one blazer Tubbo loves but just has the worst texture ever, he's not going to tell his friend what to wear but he tries to avoid touching him when he wears it) so he's rarely felt another person's hand on his.

It's nice. Tommy's hands are calloused and warm, and he has a little scar down the side of his left palm that he can feel when they settle together. He's scared to accidentally cut him with his claws, but he squeezes his hands firmly despite the risk.

"I'm *never* going to do that," he says firmly, and he can feel the determination coming off of him. He looks serious and still a bit shocked, and there's a current of anger under it, but it's-- it's *good* anger. It's like Ranboo's own anger when his friends are threatened. "Ever. You're my friend, and even if you *weren't*, I wouldn't... do any of that for something like *that*."

He's crying again. By the *End*, why does he cry when people are nice to him?

He wipes his eyes and wraps his arms around his friend, tightly, as if he can squeeze his appreciation for his kindness into him, because there's no way he could put it into words.

"You're fine, okay?" Tommy says lightly, rubbing his back. It still hurts, and for a fleeting second he's worried he'll notice either the bandages or how thin he is, but he doesn't say a thing. He just hugs him back, just as tight, and presses his own face against his hair. "I'm not mad. I promise."

He briefly allows himself the comfort of burying his face in his shoulder. Where he's holding him around the waist, his sleeves pulled slightly up, he can feel his very soft feathers on his skin. It feels nice. After a minute, he pulls away and wipes his face again. "Thank you."

He doesn't acknowledge the gratitude, ruffling up his hair briefly before letting go of him. "Are you gonna stay the night again? There's not a lot we can do, but I bet we can convince Phil to tell us stories about his adventures. He's done a *lot*."

His tail flicks as they leave the small room, wandering into the living area. Tommy is still holding

one of his hands. Ranboo pretends he's not quietly purring at the soft contact. "I'll stay if it's not any trouble, I guess. I can't really walk home in the snow."

(Really, he's just terrified to go home and doesn't want to leave this quiet, warm cabin and his affectionate friend.)

Techno is sitting at the table, looking somewhat like a scolded child as he slumps down in his chair, glaring at the mug in front of him. Even if he couldn't feel it, Ranboo is pretty sure he could peg how annoyed he is.

Phil is at the counter, whistling an unfamiliar tune as he gathers things from cabinets, presumably for cooking dinner.

"Can Ranboo stay over again?" Tommy asks without pause, tugging him to the table.

Ranboo slumps down when the older man glances over his shoulder with a slight frown and the same low darkness coming off of him. He looks back to the counter. "Of course. You can't really get home in this weather, can you?"

"No," he says, ignoring how he whimpers a little after it. "Um, if you don't want me to, I'll... walk home, it's not that bad..."

Tommy clicks his tongue, obviously disapproving. Phil chuckles and lightly shakes his head.

Techno pauses in his glaring to look up with a frown. "'S stormin' like hell out there, kid. You'd *die* before you made it back home." His words are thick and slurred, his eyes lined with exhaustion. His glasses aren't the black pair he was wearing before the execution; these are gold-framed and have small crystals on the corners that catch the light. "You can stay the night, s'fine."

"Okay," he whispers, a little taken aback by how tired yet somehow angry he seems. "I'll stay. I don't wanna get burnt by the snow anyway, so..."

"Sleepover!" Tommy cheers excitedly.

His lips tug up into a nervous smile. "Sounds fun."

# you are the night-time fear

## Chapter Notes

how's everyone doing. i am depressed!

no but for real i'm in a depressive state and writing is so fucking hard dude. i'm still having a good time though! i just wanted to explain the slight break and also why i responded to. no comments. like i always say, i read all of them!!! i just. am tired and small :-( alas, such is life.

here's a littol filler chapter. things ramp up soon in a big way, so i wanted to just write something a bit smaller and lighter to fill the gap. it's got some character stuff. some Vibes. thoughts. things like that.

warning for references to child abuse, brief self-harm, and underage drinking (both mentioned and on-screen, as it were)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy lays on his back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. He let Ranboo sleep in his bed; it's longer, it has more space for the enderman hybrid's long legs.

"I sleep all curled up anyway," Ranboo said sheepishly. "I can sleep on the couch, you can have your bed..."

"No, I've already made up my mind," Tommy said with finality. "Take the bed."

He had accepted it, after some convincing. He can hear him now, breathing quietly, occasionally shifting.

He wishes *he* could sleep. He's exhausted, every muscle feeling weak and pulled to the limit, so many emotions and awful feelings settling into him. Too much painful information has been dropped on him tonight.

All his friends think he's dead. *Tubbo* thinks he's dead.

Tubbo has been *drinking* . A lot, from what Ranboo said.

(Something shattered in the kitchen.

Tubbo curled against Techno's side, clutching Tommy's hand. "They're *still* fighting," he whispered. "It's been *hours* ."

"I know," Techno soothed. "They'll calm down soon. Hopefully."

Schlatt shouted, harsh and unintelligible. Tubbo flinched and squeezed his hand.)

He scratches at his cheek. He cut himself shaving earlier; he wasn't focused enough.

Tubbo told him, in no uncertain terms, that he'd *never* drink. Not even once.

("I'd rather *die* than turn out like Schlatt," Tubbo murmured. They were sitting on the bench, curled up close to each other, breathing in sync. "I don't *trust* myself to drink. Does that make sense?")

"Yeah," Tommy agreed, thinking of Wilbur's bruised arms and the splits in Schlatt's knuckles a thousand years before. "It makes sense to me.")

And yet .

(He missed Tubbo's birthday. He's not sure why, but that thought makes him want to scream.)

He has little reason to doubt Ranboo. Why would he lie about this? He sounded genuine.

He's proven himself trustworthy, hell, *Techno* trusts him.

Although, Tommy's ability to trust has been greatly diminished in the last few years.

He stopped being an open and trusting kid when Phil left.

("You need to clean up your wings, Tommy," Wilbur said, over his shoulder. The kitchen smelled like cooking meat and herbs, but Tommy's stomach twisted like he was smelling something disgusting. "They're getting messy, you fly too much to just leave them alone.")

Numbly, he touched the ruffled, misaligned feathers on his wings. "Okay."

"Do you want my help?" He asked, turning away from the stove.

He picked a feather out of his wing. "No." *I don't trust you to do it* . "I'll do it.")

He rolls over on his side, wings pulled close to his back. Ranboo doesn't snore, but he's making weird enderman noises in his sleep. He can just see his curled-up form, white hair a counterpoint to all the darkness. The flickers of the firelight and the lantern on the table make it seem to glow.

If Tubbo really wanted to, he could have come and visited him. But he never did. So maybe he *didn't* want to.

Would that have changed anything? He probably wouldn't be drinking; he would have stopped him.

Did Dream keep him away? Undoubtedly, he did. It sounds like something he'd do.

He wraps his arms around himself as he lays, facing the back of the couch.

God. He's exhausted.

He runs his fingers over the compass. Tubbo has one like this.

He thinks he's *dead* . Part of him— a stupid part, a reckless part— wants to run off to L'manberg and show him that he's *not* . That reckless part of him wants to tackle him in a hug and just *hold* him, show him that he's alive and kicking and happy and *they can be friends again*.

If he asked, Phil would take him. He knows he would. Even with Dream lurking around.

He's been thinking about it a lot.

He feels... wrong, though, asking that of him. He's hiding it well, but he can see the cracks in his

caring, calm facade.

He's *tired* . More tired than Tommy could ever feel, really. Phil has been through so much, more than any of them. And he feels bad, at the idea of adding anything more to that exhaustion.

It's bad enough that Techno is in such a state. Weak and oddly small and too tired to stay awake for more than a few hours at a time. It's like all his years of irregular sleep are catching up to him—he's spent most of his time sleeping this last week.

He's quieter, when he *is* awake. He drifts off into thought a lot, even in the middle of conversations. He just seems... lost, wrapped up in emotions too thick to be cut away.

Tommy just wants to help them both. But he's weak, too; he's just a ~~weak-useless-terrible-worthless~~ teenager who can't even help his family.

He's been thinking about Dream a lot, too. About how he *felt* in exile, about how Dream treated him. It was... it was *bad* . He just didn't want to be *alone* , so he let it happen.

It's not his fault. He has to remind himself of that often; he didn't do *anything* to deserve the torment, the pain. He's just a scared kid.

It's hard to believe, sometimes.

There's just... so much *happening* . All the time. He wishes things would stay calm for more than a week. He felt almost okay before the execution happened-- Ranboo visited, and they could talk and they walked around outside together and he felt less alone. Phil was being gentle and kind to both of them, and he genuinely seems like he wants to fix things with his sons. Techno was being so soft, and he said he wanted to teach him how to swordfight, and...

And then he got an anvil dropped on his chest.

Their week or so of peace crashed around them like a house of fucking cards.

He pushes himself to sit up on the couch, dragging his blankets with him, draped around his shoulders. He's tired, but he isn't sure he'll sleep.

When he was younger, he had plenty to do late at night. Techno was (and probably still is) a night owl. Wilbur was easy to rouse if he was scared or needed to talk. And Tubbo was at most a call away.

"Tommy?" Ranboo's voice calls softly. Tommy nearly jumps off the couch cushion at the surprise. "Sorry, sorry-- I just, um, can you not sleep either?"

He pulls his blankets better around himself. Even with the warm fire, he feels... very cold. "Nah, I'm... thinking too much." He gets up and walks to the fireplace, settling himself on the faded blue-and-white rug in front of it. It's lovingly patterned, but looks worn, old. He wonders where Techno got something like this.

After a few moments, Ranboo joins him, sitting at his side with one leg tucked under his body and the other stretched out in front of them. "I'm sorry. Do you want to... talk about it?" He yawns, and when Tommy glances at him, he can see his mouthful of sharp teeth. His tongue is black. Huh.

He pulls his own legs up to hug them, tucking them under his blankets. "I don't know... I'm just thinking about everything, y'know? All the stuff you told us today, and Dream, and just..." he

sighs, sinking down into the blanket.

His friend falls quiet for a moment, playing with the fluffy, soft-looking fur on his ears. “Oh,” he says, softly. “I’m sorry, y’know. Really. I didn’t mean to upset you, o-or Techno, or Phil...” he trails off, scratching his ear. “I just... I didn’t know what to do, when Tubbo told me you were ‘dead’ and that *Dream* told him that...”

He snorts a little laugh. “Ranboo, you apologize too much.” He laughs too, quiet and nervous. “I’m glad you told us, it’s important, I’m sure.” He shuffles closer to him and gently takes his hand. Immediately, he intertwines their fingers. He missed holding hands with people, and Ranboo seems to like the affection. “I just have a lot on my mind, now.”

For a few minutes, they’re quiet. Ranboo’s palms are rough, and he has... almost paw-like pads on his fingers. It feels weird against his own hands, but it’s not bad. His hands are long, too, longer than his own.

“...has Tubbo actually been drinking?” He asks, staring at the fire.

He makes a weird little noise, pretty high and chirpy. Not a bird chirp, but some kind of... weird, distorted sound. It’s interesting. “Yeah,” he says, suddenly ducking his head and wrapping his arms around himself. “A lot. I went over to his place, the other day, and saw his liquor cabinet.” He goes quiet, scratching at his ear again.

Tommy hugs himself tighter, briefly burying his face in his knees. The idea makes him want to cry, and his stomach hurts with something between disappointment and pity and a deep desire to *hold* his best friend.

(Who the fuck gave the seventeen-year-old alcohol, anyway?)

He goes tense when he feels Ranboo wrap his arms around him, making more weird noises, but he sinks into his shoulder and chest when he realizes he’s just hugging him. He’s kind of clingy, but it’s fine, because Tommy is, too. He’s warm, warmer than he is, and he smells... oddly nice. Like the cold air outside and citrus fruits and the tiniest bit like damp fur, but not in a bad way.

He wiggles his arms out from underneath the blanket. He adjusts it to drape around both him and his tall friend, and then hugs him in return, settling his arms around his thin body. His ribs are prominent through his shirt, and he frowns. Even he’s not that skinny, not anymore. Might be an enderman thing...

“I’m really sorry, Tommy,” Ranboo murmurs, resting his cheek against his head. “I know it must be awful, to think about it. I... I know I haven’t known Tubbo as long as you have, but it’s awful enough for me to see. I can’t imagine...” he trails off. “How long have you been friends?” He prompts, squeezing him closer.

He frowns into the fabric of his shirt. “About... ten years? Maybe closer to eleven. We were really little when we met.”

(“Ow!” The boy cried out, one hand flying up to his face and the other resting on the ground, holding him up on the grass.

“I’m sorry!” Tommy squawked, kneeling down in front of him. “I didn’t even see you! Are you hurt?”

He let out a tiny whine and pulled his hands from his face, showing the blood dripping from his nose. “You headbutted me,” he said thickly. “It hurts...”

“Oh, jeez, that’s not good,” he frowned, helping the boy up to his feet. “Here, uhm, my house isn’t far, I’m sure my brothers can help-- what’s your name? I’m Tommy.”

He rubbed at his bloody nose with the sleeve of his sweater. “My n-name is Tubbo.”)

“We lived near eachother, and we just... we were really good friends, right away.” Tommy stretches his legs out and leans further into Ranboo’s side. He responds by pulling him in a bit closer, their sides all pressed together. His tail wraps around his hip and the fur tickles even through his shirt. “He lived with us for a while, actually...”

He turns his face to stare into the fire. “I hope he’s okay. Do you think... do you think it would help, if he knew I wasn’t dead?”

He lets out another one of those weird chirps. “I don’t know, really.” His tail twitches and Tommy tries not to laugh. “He’s... kind of unstable. He’s angry all the time, he was even before... the news.” He pauses, briefly, chirping again and ducking his face to hide it in Tommy’s hair. “He hit Fundy the other day. It was scary, he just-- I didn’t think Tubbo could get so *violent*.”

The idea of Tubbo-- who, while not *passive*, is generally more kind than that-- just *hitting* someone like Fundy, who, for god’s sake, is *younger* than him, makes his stomach turn.

“Why...” he trails off. “Why would he hit Fundy?”

“I don’t know,” Ranboo’s voice is faint, and he slumps his shoulders, apparently trying to be smaller than his frame makes him. “He was in the way, he said. I wasn’t in the room, but I heard it, and...”

Tommy exhales, slowly.

“Before I got exiled, he was so mad at me,” he says, without really thinking about it, “I was being a jerk, because I was angry and grieving and I did dumb shit and--” His throat feels tight like he’s being choked, and he hiccups. He’s about to cry and it’s his own fault because he started talking without thinking. Dammit. “He screamed at me. He was so fucking *angry*.”

("How could you lay a fucking hand on me?!")

Ranboo squeezes his shoulders and makes soothing noises, and they’re enough like bird chirps that he instinctively slumps a little and buries his face in his chest, wanting to hide.

While he’s cuddling in close, he notices that he doesn’t have a consistent heartbeat. It’s there, but it’s so slow, and more of a low sort of rising-and-falling hum than a proper beat.

“Hey, Ranboo,” he mumbles, wanting to change the subject so he won’t burst into tears like a *loser*. “Why don’t you have a normal heartbeat?”

His answering noise is a kind of purr, and he can feel it where his face is pressed against his chest. “Mm, I’m not sure. I don’t know if I have a normal heart, so that’s probably why.”

He listens more to his odd heartbeat. “What are you, anyway? I mean, I know you’re an enderman, but...”

He purrs some more. It’s like laying with his face on a cat, with a little less fur in his nose. “I’m mostly enderman, and part ghast. The last little bit is human... I *think*.”

Tommy sits up a bit and glances up at him, scrutinizing his split-colored face and the horns

sticking out of his hair and his mismatched eyes. His furry ears twitch as he's observed.

"I can't see much ghastr in you," he says, tactfully not mentioning that he hasn't seen a ghastr in months, and doesn't have a great memory for mob appearances. "How'd that even happen? Aren't ghastrs just... angry hell jellyfish? How could they, y'know..."

Ranboo laughs, covering his mouth to smother it. "I guess, yeah. I don't really know how it worked out. I always liked to think that magic was involved in me... being *made*."

Tommy wolf-whistles softly, and they both burst into giggles. His eyes are still hot with tears, but it feels good to just *laugh*.

-

Techno stares out the window, tail flicking side to side as he observes the dark snow outside. Monsters prowl the darkness.

*Go outside*, the voices purr.

*Kill them*

*You want to*

*It will make you feel better.*

He closes the curtains and rubs his eyes. He'll read a book. He can't go outside and sate the voices and their insatiable calls for violence right now.

***Technoblade***

*You made a promise*

***They demand blood***

Ugh. They never use his name. "Can't even hold a sword right now," he murmurs to them; he's alone in the loft, and Phil's more than used to him talking back to them even if he wasn't. "Wait until I'm better."

*You promised us blood*

*Blood of the one who hurt you and your pack*

*Where is our tribute?*

"You're all feeling fairly articulate tonight, aren't you," He deadpans, walking over to his bed.

"You'll get it. I'm thinkin'."

They fall quiet. He rubs his ear, the torn one. The ragged cartilage feels odd against his fingers.

Dream is telling people that Tommy is dead. He has no clue why he'd do something like that. He needs to figure out what he's planning, but he just... can't. Not just because thinking is still difficult with how exhausted he is, but because he has no idea why Dream would be lying like that, specifically.

He lays down in his bed, covering his face with his arms even though it pulls at his wound.

"Any insights?" he asks, muffled by his arms.

*Bad intentions*

*He wants Tommy*

*He enjoys the pain*



“Well, yeah, I knew *that*,” he mutters, rolling his eyes. “He’s a sadistic bastard like that. But what is he doin’ now?” He doesn’t usually ask them what they think about things, but for all their faults, they have definitely helped him before.

*He wants to take him away again.*

He flinches. That sounded like all of them, speaking at once, a thousand distinct voices echoing inside of his skull. He rubs his temples and sinks back into his mattress. “I’m not goin’ to let him.” He stares up at the beamed ceiling. “Do you know *why* he wants him?”

*The pain*

*He feeds on misery*

*He wants to eat him*

*Like a fruit ready for harvest*

He wants to drain him of his sadness

He shudders. The imagery there is... fucking *terrifying*. Honestly, he can’t tell if the spirits are being hyperbolic or not. They often exaggerate things to make him react stronger. But there’s an odd... kind of *genuineness* to it, this time.

The idea and its implications make him shudder. He’s never letting that happen to Tommy, or anyone, for that matter.

He untucks his blankets and crawls below them, already having put on his pajamas and braided his hair for sleep. (It was tough, but he managed it. He’s capable of that much, at least.)

If he wasn’t so weak, he’d go hurt Dream down. He would arm himself to the teeth and track him down to kill him, and kill him, and *kill him*. It’s never worked, but who knows, he might get lucky this time.

(He never gets lucky.

He has no luck.)

*You promised us his blood*, a single voice murmurs. ***They*** *crave it. Don’t break a promise, little blade.*

He covers his face again. “I know,” he replies.

God, he knows.

-

The sun is just clearing the horizon when Phil gets out of bed, and creeps down from the loft.

The kids are asleep-- Techno in his bed upstairs, curled around his plush pig and breathing softly, and Ranboo and Tommy laying on the floor by the fire, curled up together underneath a blanket that’s too small for their lanky bodies.

He drapes a few other blankets over them, trying to keep them warm. Tommy mumbles and turns to bury his face in his friend’s shoulder, and Ranboo lets out a string of words in ender, turning onto his back. (He thinks he might have heard something like “go away” in the distorted words, but he’s out of practice with the language.)

He chuckles at the sight, petting his fingers through Tommy’s hair before walking on..

(He shouldn't trust Ranboo, but he can't help it. He's already worming his way into his heart, into the soft place his own sons occupy. Between how Tommy behaves around him, both protected and protective, and how Techno trusts him almost-fully, he can't help himself.

Eh. What's another kid to add to the list?

Hopefully he won't fuck up as much this time.)

Phil walks softly to the bookshelf and kneels next to it, moving aside a few thick volumes to instead grab a thin book with a black cover, resting against the back of the shelf, hidden. He takes it out and replaces the books disguising it.

He sits down at the kitchen table, and flips open the book.

His own handwriting stares back at him.

*“Don't try this again,”* he mouths, running his fingers over the note and chuckling soundlessly.

*Sorry, past Phil, we're doing this again.*

He turns a few more pages, and observes the carefully written words, the diagrams of the symbols. He traces a finger over them, and the scar down his arm burns with phantom pain.

The first time he tried this... it went horribly. For both of them.

Broken totems. This very book, open to this very page. The looming white quartz of her grave. The chalk symbols scribbled on the floorboards. Blood dripping down his arm, tracing the wound that became an ugly scar. His own blood, turning darker and darker as he tried to bring her back. Feathers, grey and black and an oil-slick purple, scattered and moving in the wind. Glowing shapes burned into his vision from the *four times* he did the ritual.

Her unfamiliar, black-clawed hands trembling, giving him hope. Her eyes even opened, once.

But.

It never worked, and he had to bury her again.

This time...

This time it's going to work.

He'll do whatever it takes.

He gets to reading.

-

Tubbo stares at himself in the mirror, lit only by the stark white-blue light of the bulbs above him.

He looks pale and fragile. His burn scars look darker, deeper.

His horns gleam.

...they're definitely getting bigger.

He fiddles with the razor on the counter. He presses his finger against the blade and blood, bright

red under the lights, wells up.

He slides it down and lets it cut into his wrist, slow, almost gentle. The blade is sharp enough that it doesn't hurt beyond a faint sting.

"What are you doing?"

He jumps, raising his eyes to meet Schlatt's own, empty and white, as the ghost hovers behind him.

"Nothing," He says, turning on the tap to rinse off the small cuts. "Getting ready for bed."

"Mhm," he floats over and perches on the side of the bathtub, flicking a cigarette. Despite the ash being harmless, incorporeal, Tubbo still flinches on instinct. "Tomorrow's the big day, isn't it? Your best friend's funeral."

He sighs, covering the wounds with bandages. "Yeah, it is. I..." The grief threatens to choke him off, so he silences himself and wets his toothbrush.

"You're really in an awful mess, aren't you," Schlatt drawls, taking a drag from his cigarette. The navy-blue dark circles under his eyes look particularly dark in this lighting. "Losing your best friend after banishing him, your country's a goddamn wreck, all your friends are keeping secrets... all before you're eighteen! You have me beat, kid. Even I didn't cause that much trouble for myself--"

"Shut up," Tubbo mutters. He starts brushing his teeth a bit too aggressively. The mint burns his gums and his tongue. He was never very fond of it.

He spits in the sink. "I'm fully capable of exorcising you, Schlatt. You're allowed to stay here only because of my kindness." His voice is surprisingly calm, cool, despite how he feels like he's sliding into a frozen lake, colder than cold. "So don't make me get the salt."

Quiet settles. Tubbo finishes brushing his teeth and washes his face as well. Schlatt smokes his cigarette down to nothing but ash, and when he drops the remains, it disappears. If the smoke was real, he's sure he'd be choking on it.

God.

"You won't exorcise me," he says, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and a confident smirk on his face. "Because if you did, you'd have no one to talk to."

Tubbo rolls his eyes as he leaves the bathroom. "I have other people to talk to..."

"Yeah, sure you do." Schlatt floats on his back in the air, chuckling. "But you don't trust them. I get to know all the details, don't I? What was it you were planning to do to your amnesiac traitor?"

He tries not to laugh at the idea. It makes him feel a morbid, sadistic joy. Watching Ranboo try to slink towards the tundra unseen was darkly amusing (like they wouldn't see his seven-and-a-half-foot tall form sneaking through the streets) and after the funeral is out of the way... he can pursue that. When he has space in his mind. "It doesn't matter. I haven't decided yet, anyway."

He glances at his bed, and then to the door. He already brushed his teeth, but...

He won't be able to sleep, not sober at least.

...he'll just brush his teeth again.

He pulls on a sweater over his pajamas and walks out of his room, to the kitchen. He flips only the light above the table on, filling the room with a warm glow.

"Are you going to keep drinking my liquor?" Schlatt asks, following him. God, how can a ghost be so fucking annoying? Why couldn't he have turned all innocent and confused like Wilbur? "Some of that was expensive, you know."

"It's not like you're going to drink it," Tubbo points out. They tried that. He grabs a glass and a bottle. "It'll go to waste. Besides, I've already drank almost everything you left behind..."

"God, kid. I was *right*, you're worse than me."

He gives a weak chuckle as he fills the glass. "At least I'm not dead."

"You'll *drink* yourself to death at this rate," he sits down on the counter, leaning back on the cabinets with his arms crossed. His expression is... oddly contemplative. "D'you really want to be hungover at your best friend's funeral?"

He shrugs, sipping from the glass. The taste of whiskey no longer has any effect on him. "I'm usually hungover anyway."

"That's my boy," the ghost of his father drawls sarcastically.

It's pathetic, but it makes Tubbo laugh anyway.

## Chapter End Notes

glatt sucks but he's so fun to write

i dont know when exactly but the end of this fic is comin' folks. pogchamp. there's gonna be another tho, dw

go drink some water!

# i'll search without sleeping 'til peace i can find

## Chapter Notes

\**v i b r a t e s*\*plot time plot time plot time!!!

this is a big plot event chapter!!! things are happening! aaa!!!

im feeling a lot less depressed today!!! i slept a lot!!! :-D im feeling good!!! and therefore!!! new chapter!!! poggers!!!

warnings for this one: mild gore, lots of blood, another scene of very brief non-consensual touching, references to unsafe binding, and just. generally bad times. there is fluff though! it's happy-ish at the end!

this chapter is one of my favorites so far. everything is just. the exact shit i want to write, thank you.

title from bones in the ocean by the longest johns! a banger.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The day of the funeral is sunny and cold.

Ranboo fidgets with his tie as Tubbo speaks about Tommy, all too aware of his own lies.

Everyone is quiet, save for the occasional sounds of grief.

It's uneventful, as far as funerals go.

-

Fundy swallows his reservations as he carefully opens the door.

The house is dark and silent, still. A cat sleeps on the kitchen counter, sprawled out on its side, and another dozes on the floor.

They don't look up as he slips through the darkness, unseen and silent. He can be sneaky, when he wants to.

Ranboo is asleep in bed, curled up on his side, his tail swaying where it sticks out of the blankets.

Fundy steps lightly into the room. The floor doesn't creak.

*Good.*

What he's looking for is laying on the nightstand, unassumingly, a pen next to it and a purple ribbon bookmark sticking out of the pages. He's seen it before; it's his memory book, where he writes down important things, things he *needs* to remember.

He doesn't know why Tubbo sent *him* to steal it, it seems pretty rude, but... he'd rather not do something to get on the president's nerves. (His cheek is still bruised.)

And besides, he's flattered that he, specifically, was sent to take it.

"You can see in the dark pretty well, can't you?" Tubbo asked, smiling with more kindness than Fundy had seen in a while. "It'll be easier for you to sneak around."

His chest still feels a little warm from that smile and the praising tone.

He grabs the book.

This was remarkably easy. He didn't even lock his door-- Tubbo was right about that.

His eyes flick to Ranboo's sleeping form. He sniffs in his sleep and turns over, now facing him, arms curled around a plush enderman, which is... kind of cute, honestly.

Just as quiet as before, Fundy walks back to the door, glancing back over his shoulder again just to be sure he's safe.

Ranboo hugs his plush tighter, and curls up under the blankets a little more. His eyes don't open.

He escapes unseen.

-

"Where did I put it?" Ranboo asks himself aloud, the third time he finishes going through his chests and his nightstand and the kitchen cabinets and the cabinet under the bathroom sink.

He could have sworn he put his memory book on his nightstand before going to sleep last night. He wrote down a few things and then closed it and put it on the nightstand. But it's not there. Where could it be? He checked everywhere, three times!

He brings a hand up and bites at his claws. *Where could it be? Where did you put it? Where?*

He goes through searching again, moving things around and taking them out, checking in every little nook and cranny. But it's just... not *there*.

He bites at his thumbnail as he sits down on the edge of his bed, inspecting his nightstand. He put it right there! Where is it?

*It's not there. Where did you put it?*

He's shaking, a little.

-

Tubbo taps his pencil against the side of his glass, humming a light tune under his breath as he flips through the book.

Anyone would mistake him for being completely content, but he's fucking *seething*.

*Ranboo is a traitor. A fucking traitor.*

He's been working with Technoblade, of all people! After Tubbo told him what he did to him, what he did to their country! After seeing the extent of his scars, after seeing how much work they had to do to arrest him! Even *Dream* wanted him gone!

He flips another page, running his finger down the lines of words. His handwriting is neat if thin,

with small smudges of ink. He can tell he was happy while writing this.

His lip curls in a mean snarl. What kind of power-play was that, anyway? Ranboo telling them where Techno's hideout was, and then staying on his side? And-- according to this page-- helping him get home after the execution?

And that's not even counting all of this about Tommy. Alive, *lying* Tommy. Tommy, who's been alive this whole goddamn time, who faked his death without letting his *best friend* know. How hard is it to send a fucking message? To show up in the middle of the night to at least let him know he's alive?

Apparently much harder than fucking off to the Arctic to be with his family, who's abandoned him more than once, who's hurt *all of them*. To be with his neglectful father who left all three of his sons to fend for themselves and *killed his brother*, and his traitorous brother who tried to destroy everything they've built out of a warped sense of justice, and didn't even have the *common decency* to *die for his crimes* .

God, he wants to fucking hurt someone. He used to feel queasy about violence, but now the idea of it makes him want to laugh, delighted, because at least he's not *freezing* anymore.

He snaps the book shut, and downs the rest of his drink. The burn makes him grin.

"Tubbo?" Fundy asks, peeking into his office with furrowed brows and a hesitant smile. His fur-darkened nose scrunches when he smiles. "Are you doing alright?"

"Just fine," Tubbo lies, smiling back. "Can you go find Quackity for me? We need to have a bit of a meeting."

"Yeah, sure." The shapeshifter nods, ears tucking back against his head. His whiskers twitch as he notices the book. "Do we need Ranboo, too, or...?"

The mean snarl returns, and he gets up to refill his glass. "No, not this time." *Not yet* . "Just the three of us."

"Okay..." Fundy trails off, watching him with wary eyes, before scurrying off.

Tubbo smiles to himself as he goes through one of his desk drawers for the knife that Dream offered him as a birthday gift.

"What are you doing now?"

He doesn't look over at the ghost, though his face spreads in a bright grin. "I'm planning some justice."

-

Ranboo knows he's too trusting, sometimes.

It's easy to gain his trust-- he knows he's been so deprived of kindness for so long, that even the barest things feel like a reward. He's trying to work himself out of it.

But maybe that's why he came into this cold little alleyway with so little prompting.

"What's this about?" He asks, holding his umbrella over his head to keep the cold, cold rain away. "Couldn't we meet inside?"

Tubbo smiles at him, showing off perfect teeth, and shakes his head lightly. "No, I think this will work just fine."

He huffs a little. "Okay, I guess. What-- uh, what do you want to talk about?" He wants to get this over with so he can go back to looking for...

His smile turns into something cold and cruel. "Well, I found something, and I want to let you explain yourself before I take any measures."

It's then he notices the book in his hands.

*His memory book.*

Ranboo curses under his breath, panic settling into his stomach. "Th-that's *mine* , Tubbo-- give it *back* , I've been l-looking for it all day." It's so cold out-- he's shivering. He should have grabbed his coat, he's so bad about forgetting it.

His friend flips the book open and goes to a page, holding it open. "I really thought I could trust you," he says, voice thick with pity as he runs a finger along the words. "But all of this stuff... about Technoblade and Philza? And-- all this about *Tommy* , too, god..." He clicks his tongue and slams the book shut so forcefully that he jolts. "They're all set against us, Ranboo. Two anarchists and a *criminal* . Why are you helping them?"

His words come out slightly distorted. "They're not against *me* . I don't take sides, Tubbo, I st-stay with *people* , and they're *nice* to me, s-so I--" *And one of them is your best friend, or was once, you should be happy* , he wants to add, but he can't speak any further.

Tubbo's smile turns into a snarl and he snaps his fingers, the sound oddly clear in Ranboo's overwhelmed brain.

Grinning as bright as ever, Quackity steps out of the shadows, followed by Fundy, who looks at least less *enthusiastic* .

"Again, I thought I could trust you," the president sighs, shaking his head. "But you know, I'm willing to let you off with a punishment."

Ranboo shudders, not just from the frigid air. "A punish-- what kind of punishment? I didn't do *anything* worthy of..."

Tubbo clicks his tongue again. "You're a *traitor* , Ranboo."

"I'm not!" he argues, trembling. His tail whips harshly behind his legs and he curls his hands into tight fists next to his chest. (When did he drop his umbrella?) "I wasn't doing anything to d-damage the country or anything, I-I was helping my *friends* !"

They all give pitying laughs. "Oh, you really think they're your *friends* ?" Tubbo asks softly. "I knew you were naive, but I never thought you'd be that *stupid* ."

He flinches, and suddenly all he wants to do is run away. He wants to leave, he wants to go home and curl up in bed with his pets, he wants to curl up against Dream and sleep--

*Dream?*

*What?*



(A confused, fuzzy memory of soft green cloth and a hand carding through his hair.)

*What was that?*

"I'm not stupid," he whispers, voice shaking and small.

A hand, strong and sure, seizes his tie, and yanks him down to Tubbo's level. His spine protests the two-odd feet he's pulled, with a hot stab of pain that makes him let out a weak growl, scratching along his throat.

"Oh, Ranboo," he says with a bright, mean smile, blue-and-green eyes sparkling. "If you weren't? You would have gotten out of this by now."

And it's. It's so quick that he almost doesn't realize what's happening. Strong hands seize his upper arms, another wraps around one of his ears, and the sharp shock of pain makes him screech.

His head is tilted back, so he's held still, and he sees the flash of a knife. A smooth, neat blade, netherite, the blade sharpened to an intimidating point.

"*Tubbo?*" He says, and his voice isn't his normal, it's choked off with the guttural tones of ender. "*What are you **doing** ?*"

"Tubbo, are you-- are you sure about this?" Fundy asks, voice hesitant. "Does he really deserve this?"

Tubbo smiles at him, still holding his tie, and quick as anything, he raises the knife and stabs it--  
--into his eye.

He can't even scream, because it doesn't really hurt. He just chokes out a growl and jerks against the hands holding him still.

Fundy's paw leaves his ear, he can tell it's his because of the scrape of his claws and his pads. "*What the fuck?!*" His voice is high and somewhat hysterical.

The hands around Ranboo's shoulders only tighten as he jerks and screeches at the feeling of blood dripping down his cheek, a hot sensation of pain filling his eyesocket and practically diving into his brain.

He can't see. He can't *see*. The colors usually afforded to him by that side are-- are completely gone, everything is inverted, he can't *see* out of that eye--

An awful, *awful* scream, a gha's cry mixed with an enderman's death screech, leaves his mouth and he lashes out instinctively, all gangly limbs and no grace, slamming an elbow into Quackity's middle, yanking himself back up to his full height and knocking Tubbo to the ground.

His tie pulls so tight it feels like it's strangling him, and when he reaches up to loosen it, his claws shred it, easily tearing through his gloves.

He's losing control.

"*Get away get away get away*," he chants in ender, falling to the ground and scrambling back on hands and feet until he's curled up against the wall of the building. Water runs in lines down the cold wall and sinks into his shoulders but he can't even feel it because his eye is on fire with pain and he can't breathe between the panic and the tightness of his bandages.

Inappropriately, he wishes he was with Tommy right now. Tommy is nice and his hands are warm and he wants to lay with his head on his lap and have him pet his hair and talk about nothing.

He's scared and in pain and he wants to be with someone he trusts because he's suddenly very aware that he can trust *no one* here.

He reaches up to feel his eye, wanting to know if it's gone or just damaged, and his fingers meet slick blood but he can close his eye and still feel a pressure there, so it's still— it's still there, right? It's damaged but it's still there and that's good.

Tubbo kneels in front of him, smiling without it reaching his eyes. He drops his memory book on his lap, and laughs, just shy of sounding sane. (He looks mostly sober. By the *End*, he's just now noticing how he's obviously fucking *sober* . Somehow, that's worse.)

“Get out of my country,” he says lightly, quickly rising to his feet again. “If we see you here again, we have legal rights to drag you to prison. And you don't want that, do you?”

He kicks him in the stomach. It hurts, and he can't help his screech, curling up around his book.

Somehow, by some miracle, he makes it home.

He isn't sure how.

He comes to sitting on the kitchen floor, barely able to think for the pain, his hand and a cloth pressed to his bleeding eye. His clothes are damp with rainwater and blood. His tie is in tatters and so is part of his shirt. His gloves are gone and his fingers hurt. He's shivering and burning up at the same time.

There's blood everywhere, discoloring the floor.

He sobs, softly. It makes his head spin.

He needs help. Who can he ask for help? Techno? No, no, he's too far away. So is Phil. Ugh...

Maybe— maybe...

*Niki!*

He scrabbles with blood-slick hands at his suit jacket— *when did he take it off???* — and grabs his comm. His fingers are shaky and wet as he clumsily types a message to her, barely able to see even with his good eye.

“need help please niki help me”

There's blood all over the screen.

His head is both heavy and light at the same time. He sinks back against the cabinets, staring up at the ceiling. He can't focus. His chest hurts and his breathing keeps hitching.

The door creaks open. He can feel someone staring at him, but he doesn't have the energy to be afraid.

“Oh, kid.” Dream kneels down in front of him, purple ( *green!* ) clothes bright in the dark room. “What happened to you?” He takes his mask off, and Ranboo feels a jolt of-- of familiarity, at the sight of his bright-purple ( *green!* ) eyes and the scars on his face and his freckles.

“ *I-I, Tubbo read my memory book a-and got so angry, h-he stabbed me ,*” he’s really not sure if the words are in English, but he doesn’t care, rambling about it is keeping him awake and he’s keenly aware that passing out would be *bad* .

Dream sits down next to him and lets him curl against his side, and maybe he should be scared of the sudden kindness, but he isn’t. He doesn’t even care about the disturbing blank feeling he gets from him, not now.

He just wants to be *held* , and he is. He drapes his arm around his waist and rubs his side, right where his bandages are slowly strangling him, and it feels good.

“ *He c-called me stupid a-and stabbed me and s-said if I stay here he’s going to arrest me,* ” he babbles, nudging his head into Dream’s shoulder as he presses the cloth in harder against his eye. “ *I c-can’t see, Dream, it hurts...* ”

He pets back his hair, apparently not caring about the blood staining it. For too long, he’s quiet save for soft humming. Ranboo chokes back shuddering sobs, his cheek burning with tears and pulses of pain going through his damaged eye with every slow heartbeat.

He just strokes his hair for a while, gentle and affectionate. It’s steady and grounding, and he curls into it, his free hand grasping his arm.

Suddenly (or maybe it’s not sudden, maybe he dozed off) his hand turns into a fist in the back of his head, his hand gripping his side, the heel of his palm pressing against his sore chest and making him screech in pain.

Dream yanks him up to face him, and holds him still, *staring* right into his good eye. His expression is one of pure glee, and he licks his lips like an animal about to devour helpless prey.

Ranboo doesn’t need to have mild psychic abilities to know he’s in danger. He can do nothing but whimper and tremble within his grip, jerking weakly yet unable to get free.

“Poor thing,” Dream murmurs softly, sliding his hand along his chest *slowly*-- he shudders and gasps out a sob because the touch is *wrong*-- to rise and cup his blood-soaked cheek. He flinches back slightly, but he digs his nails into his flesh and he stills, whimpering. “You’re just too *dumb* to see the trouble you’ve gotten yourself into, aren’t you?”

He sobs and squeezes his good eye shut. Tears slice down his cheek and he wants to disappear, all the pain mixing together into a dark ache that makes him want to scream and scream and *scream* until his throat is raw. One hand grips his hair and when he drags his hand down, he settles it on his chest again, not doing anything but making him feel like he’s being crushed.

Dream lets go of him *abruptly* . He falls back onto the floor and curls into himself, sobbing and letting out weak screeches of pain.

He doesn’t say anything else, or if he does, Ranboo doesn’t hear it. He pets his hair again for a long time, fingers carding through the damp strands.

After a while, he kisses his forehead, before rising to his feet and leaving, silent.

(For a second, he almost *felt something* , from him. A flicker of... a *soft* emotion, like an apology.

It’s almost worse than the blank wall he’s always been greeted with.)

Ranboo stays curled up and crying, until unconsciousness takes him.

The blood around him begins to dry, as do the tears on his cheek.

-

Dream wasn't given the necessary context to the situation.

All he knows is that he can hear Ranboo crying, and a part of him that remembers the doe-eyed enderling he tried to protect all those years ago forced him to shove through the darkness in his mind to try and help him.

He was greeted by his hand wrapped tightly in black-and-white hair, the sight of bright-red blood dripping down a paper-white cheek, and Ranboo trying to *get away* from him.

History just keeps repeating itself.

He lets go, maybe a bit too roughly, and he falls to the floor, curling around himself and letting out screechy sobs. Dream's stomach aches with guilt and disgust. Did... did he do this? What happened to him?

God, there's so much blood.

"It's okay," he murmurs softly, kneeling next to the boy's head. He has no idea what to do to help him, he won't even be in control for very long because he's not outrageously angry and he can still feel the demon lurking just behind him.

But he can try to calm him down.

Ranboo's hair is matted with blood, but he still gently strokes it, not caring when his fingers become uniformly red. "You're okay," he soothes, knowing it isn't true. "You're gonna be okay."

He cries louder, sharp and screechy like a ghastr, and Dream instinctively flinches a little, control wavering.

As if being grabbed, he's yanked back into the darkness of his mind. He screams uselessly, wishing he could punch the demon right in its stupid blank-eyed face.

"Don't hurt him!" He screams, hearing it echo back to him. "Don't you dare lay a fucking hand on him!"

There is no reply, just a low, rumbling chuckle. He can feel it kiss Ranboo on the forehead, and that makes him want to scream.

He doesn't want him to hurt him again.

-

Niki ducks her head as she hurries down the street. The puddles on the ground soak her shoes and the hem of her coat, but she barely notices it.

Nor does she pay attention to the ache throughout her back and shoulders from flying; she'll need to ice her back and wings for *hours* later, but not now.

Not now.

Her hair is plastered to her head with the rain, and her wings are equally soaked. She's shivering, but she's almost there. It's only a few houses down, right--?

*Yes!*

She breaks into a sprint as she runs towards Ranboo's house. She fumbles with the slick doorknob, but she manages to muscle it open and slam it behind her all in one quick motion.

"Ranboo!" She isn't shouting, but it's close. Her voice is trembling.

There's no sound. It's frighteningly silent in the house, not even the pets are making any noise.

She shakes out her wings as best she can, the feathers feeling heavy and waterlogged, and strips off her soaked coat as she walks into the kitchen.

There's blood on the floor. Lots of it. Red and green and a bit of purple, all over the floor. She steps directly in a decently sized, half-dry puddle of it and she swears viciously under her breath.

Ranboo is lying almost dead center on the floor, curled up on his side with his face to the ground. The blood is in a pool around his head, his white hair and skin stained bright red with it.

His suit jacket lays in a wet heap on the floor nearby, and his shirt is shredded, along with his tie. His hands are ungloved and she can see small cuts along the pads of his fingers.

Gods, what happened to him?

She throws her coat to the side and kneels down next to him on the floor. She gently brushes blood-slick hair from his face and tips his head up.

His eyes are closed, but drying, thick blood is caked underneath his left eye, running in a defined trail down his cheek and spread over his eyelid.

A sick feeling settles in Niki's stomach. Something *awful* happened here, and she doesn't know what.

She gets up. She digs through her bag-- she guessed that she'd need medical supplies, judging by the tone of that message-- and sets out everything she needs on a dry spot on the floor. Cleaning his wound, whatever it may be, won't be easy due to how his skin reacts to water, but she thinks it's worth the risk.

She uses a cloth soaked in water to gently wipe away the thick blood, making sure to dry his skin as soon as she gets the blood off.

Her hands are trembling. Really, all of her is trembling. Her lip won't stop wobbling and she's aware that tears are already dripping down her cheeks.

Once she gets the blood off, she gently opens his eye.

Shit. It's obviously been... stabbed? The eyeball itself is damaged, not entirely ruined, but she'd be surprised if he's able to see out of it, with the puncture wound in it, just shy of his deep-red iris. There are two small cuts down his cheek as well.

"Poor baby," she murmurs, stroking back his hair.

His breathing is shallow and his face is completely bloodless, not even a hint of his odd blush on his cheeks. How long has he been bleeding?

She cleans the wound carefully, before dripping a bit of healing potion into his eye. It does nothing but heal the cuts on his cheek, so she waits a few moments before adding just the same amount of

regeneration.

The only change is the stab wound closing up completely, leaving his eye a milky grey with a pure-white pupil and iris, cataracted and clouded.

She bites her lip, tears arcing down her cheeks. Oh, the poor thing. He's definitely going to be unable to see after that.

She wraps the wound, cushioning his eye with gauze before winding bandages around his head. It's healing, but it'll definitely need to be covered to prevent infection. She would like to wash his hair clean, but she fears the pain will just make him wake up in a horrible state. After he's conscious and feeling better, then.

She sits back on the tile floor and runs her hands through her still-damp hair. She needs to wake him up, but part of her just wants to let the boy sleep.

Her wings and back are aching. Her feathers are waterlogged and it's deeply uncomfortable. She desperately wants to just preen them, but she doesn't have time yet.

Ranboo mumbles, good eye fluttering, and he looks up at her with a dazed expression. "Niki...?"

Niki smiles weakly and pets his blood-slick hair. "Hi, Ranboo. You scared me."

"When did you..." his words trail off and his good eye goes slightly unfocused. "When did you get here...?"

"Just a little bit ago, I came here after you messaged me," she soothes, rubbing his temple. "What happened?"

He closes his eye again, breathing a bit deeper as he begins to wake up. "I... th-they found-- they *stole* my memory book," he frowns and reaches up to touch his bandaged face. "I wrote some stuff about Techno a-and everybody out there, about what happened after the e-execution, and... h-he-- Tubbo, I mean-- he stabbed me, my eye, i-it's... he said it was a *punishment*..." He rests his head on her lap and whimpers softly.

She keeps petting his hair, willing her hands not to shake. Rage wells in her stomach, rising up to fill her lungs and her throat.

She knew, logically, that he's been in *some* kind of danger. Everyone here is... unstable, to say the least. Hell, she saw Technoblade's failed execution, and that was *bad*.

But this... this is basically *torture*. Ranboo did nothing wrong, he helped someone who was in need, who had been keeping to himself, who hadn't so much as been near the country in months...

and he got stabbed in the *eye* for it.

And it was *Tubbo* who did it, too. Her heart aches and her throat burns with anger. (What has this place done to these poor kids?)

"We need to get you cleaned up the rest of the way," she murmurs. "Do you think you could take a quick shower? I'll make you something to eat for after."

Ranboo whines a little, pushing himself into a slumped sitting position. "Maybe," he mumbles. "Oh. My... my head's spinnin'. Been bleedin' for a while."

Niki nods, gently resting her hand on his back. "Yeah, I can tell. Do you want my help?"

He shakes his head, rubbing his bloody face. "No..." he sits up a little further and his breath suddenly hitches. He grabs his chest and wheezes slightly. "Ow, ow. Gotta... take my bandages off..."

She frowns, glancing at his chest. "You're not supposed to wear those," she scolds gently. "You really do need to take them off, Ranboo."

He frowns, reaching up to fiddle with his torn tie and shirt. "I know... I just don't have anything else..." he stumbles up to his feet, swaying.

She rises with him, bracing a hand on his back now. She grabs the mostly-full bottle of healing potion, and puts it in his hands. "Take this, it should make you feel good enough to get clean."

He nods, shakily uncorking the bottle and taking a deep drink. She can see from how his gaze clears that the pain is lessened, and he's able to breathe more evenly. "Thank you," he mumbles, leaning down to hug her around the shoulders tightly. He's trembling. "m... gonna try and shower, a-and then..."

"And then you'll eat," Niki adds softly, "And then you'll get some rest."

He hiccups, wiping tears from his good eye. "I can't," he says. "Tubbo said i-if I stay, they're gonna put me in prison. 'Cause I'm a t-traitor, a-and..."

"You're not," she interrupts, squeezing his arm gently. He looks down at her with mild panic in his expression. "You're not a traitor. And even if you are... gods, that's no reason for them to *hurt* you like that."

He lets out a nervous chirp, pulling away from her, and she can tell from the flick of his tail that he's on the verge of breaking down. She nods her head firmly and looks away, not wanting to make him feel any worse. "Go take your shower. You can take the bandages on your face off, I'll put them on again after."

"Okay," he says softly. "I... um. I'll call for you i-if I need anything."

She nods again, and she can hear his footsteps quietly retreat to the bathroom.

She gets to work cleaning the floor, which is a mindless enough task that she can think while she does it.

She needs to find somewhere safe for Ranboo.

The fact that she let this happen makes her want to cry and scream and pluck her own feathers out-- she's the closest thing this boy has to family, and she *let this happen*, she let him stay here despite knowing it was *dangerous*. She needs to assure his safety now, even if it's after the fact and the damage has been done.

The blood is embedded in the grout of the tiles, but that's fine. She just doesn't want to slip. She cleans up all the still-wet blood and scrubs her hands clean in the sink.

She can hear the shower running, for longer than usual. The poor thing was covered in blood, he might be risking the burns just to get clean...

She makes him a plate of food, piling it with more meat than he'd usually ask for-- he doesn't

actually *need* to eat a lot, but she's going to try and force the issue today. He'll need his strength.

She needs to find somewhere safe for him. Her house isn't enough for that, it's barely enough for just her. It's not safe enough.

She needs help.

She thinks she might know who to ask. The idea is... intimidating, just a little, but she trusts his word.

She sets the plate on the table and sits across from it, pushing the chair back and bringing her wings forward to begin drying them on a towel she grabbed from the closet. She usually would just let them air-dry, but she can't have wet wings in the still-cool air outside.

She dries them carefully, wincing as the towel pushes already misaligned feathers into more and more uncomfortable positions. As soon as she's dry enough, she begins straightening them out, fixing the mess of tangled feathers.

Ranboo comes back into the kitchen, dressed in fresh clothes. His injured eye looks odd in the dim kitchen, the new white-grey color being so foreign compared to the red that used to be there. He doesn't say much as he walks to the table and begins eating, not making a sound.

Niki is almost done with her preening by then. She looks up to give him a light smile, which he attempts to return, before going back to it. "Bandages off?" she asks.

"Y-yeah," he mumbles, mouth half-full. "My chest's all bruised... I won't wear t-them for a while."

"That's good," she says, picking out a broken feather and dropping it on the table. Her wings *ache*, from the tips of her feathers to the bones in her back, but she'll live. She had to fly, it was a necessary risk.

Once they're all sorted out, she shakes them once before folding them against her back. She forces herself into as straight of a sitting position as she can, knowing it will relieve some of the ache, before grabbing her bag and pulling out her communicator.

She takes a steadying breath. She isn't sure why Technoblade trusts her so much, why he would offer her unconditional support. But she needs it now more than ever. Not just for her sake, but for Ranboo as well. She needs to keep him safe, and she doesn't want to leave him alone, as selfish as that may be.

So.

She calls Technoblade.

It rings for a while. Long enough that she starts getting nervous, bouncing her leg and picking at her nails.

The line connects and she jolts.

"Niki?" Techno asks, cool and calm as ever, nothing like the broken man with tears in his eyes and shaking hands she helped out of L'manberg two weeks ago.

"Hey, Techno," Niki says, her voice shaking just a little. Ranboo looks up from his food with wide eyes. "I... listen, I don't know how to explain it, but... Ranboo needs a place to stay. They...



*attacked* him, and called him a traitor, and... well, you know how things are around here. He can't stay."

"Not good," he agrees, something dark in his voice. She thinks about the wound crowded with broken bones and torn flesh and bites her tongue. "Is he hurt?"

"Yeah," she says, still bouncing her leg, still picking at her chipped blue nail polish. "He, uh... they stabbed him in the eye."

Techno inhales sharply on the other side of the line, and her eyes sting with tears. Ranboo stares at her with alarm in his gaze. "So he can't stay in L'manberg," he says, and she can hear footsteps on a wooden floor. "He can come here. We'll make space for him."

Niki swallows and nods despite knowing he can't see her. She scratches at her thumbnail. "I wouldn't ask if it didn't feel... necessary. I just want him to be safe." She bites into her lower lip, and lets herself slump. "Could I... could I come with him? I know I'm asking a *lot* of you, Techno, but-- I just want to make sure he's *safe*..."

Ranboo whimpers across from her and pushes his plate away, wrapping his arms around himself and hunching down. She tries not to let herself cry at the sight, how small he tries to become.

"Niki," Techno says, voice softer than she's ever heard it. She bites into her cheek to keep from bursting into sobs. "Both of you can come here. I'm... I'm really glad you trust me that much, that you'd call me for help. And I meant it, when I said I'd help you *no matter what*. I kinda owe you."

She giggles wetly and wipes her eyes. "I helped you because you're my *friend*, Techno, you don't owe me," her voice is gently and *inappropriately* scolding, and he laughs lightly on his side of the line. "Thank you, though. So much."

"You're welcome," he replies, still soft. "It's a bit of a long walk out here. Pretty sure Ranboo knows the way, but I'll send you coordinates just to make sure."

"Thank you," she says again. "We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Alright. Be safe, Niki."

"I will. Bye, Techno."

She hangs up, and runs her hand through her hair, making the damp strands cling to her fingers. "Finish eating," she says to Ranboo, who's still practically cowering. Her chest downright *aches* with anxiety and guilt, worse than her wings, and she needs to focus on something else. "Is there anything you need me to pack, while you eat?"

He fiddles with the collar of his shirt. "U-uh... my books, and some clothes... I'll help you in a sec," he goes back to his food, only taking small bites. "I need to get my armor, too..."

"I'll get it," she promises, leaning over to kiss his cheek. He laughs thickly. "I'll grab anything that seems important, and then we can get going."

Ten minutes later, they're on their way. She had grabbed some of her own clothes, before leaving home-- she just felt like she'd need them, and she was right. Her intuition is as keen as ever.

They run into trouble just as they're making their way out of the country, ducking across a bridge.

The sky is a strange grey-gold in the sunset, and rain is still falling lightly. Niki is dressed in one of Ranboo's old coats, because hers was too wet, and it's too big on her even though it's an old one-- it makes her feel unwieldy as she grabs her knife and holds it as a precaution. At least he didn't mind when she had to cut slits in the back for her wings.

In the strange light, she can catch sight of the gold-winged figure walking ten or so feet behind them. She grits her teeth and holds her knife a bit tighter.

Ranboo notices him, too. She can feel tension rise in his body, and his whipping tail brushes her back. He has a sword at his waist, but she wouldn't bet on him being able to use it. He's not much of a fighter even with both eyes intact.

She can hear Quackity's footsteps in the puddles behind them.

"Where are you two going?" He asks, tone light.

Niki feels her wings twitch, spreading involuntarily as her anger grows. Ranboo hadn't said as much, but she can tell Quackity had a hand in his torture from his reaction. And all she wants to do is get them out of here.

"Away from here," she says flatly. "Like you told him to."

He gets a bit closer, and she adjusts her grip on her knife. She's not violent, but if she has to...

"I don't think it's time for you to leave yet," he says, still light. "Do you think you'll really get off with such a light punishment, Ranboo?"

Ranboo hunches his shoulders and hugs himself, gaze glued to the ground.

She bares her teeth, though he can't yet see it. "You blinded him," she mutters. "Get away, we're leaving."

Quackity reaches forward to grab Ranboo's arm, and his hand brushes her feathers.

All her rages centers on this one, convenient figure.

Niki whips around, knife in hand, teeth showing, and sinks the blade to its hilt into his shoulder.

He shouts in pain, but she doesn't give him a chance to retaliate. She pulls the knife from his body with a painful twist and grabs his opposite arm, and with strength she didn't know she possessed, she pulls just right on his wrist and it--

it *snaps* . She can feel it, the snapping of bone, the definitive *crack* .

He *howls* .

Niki grabs Ranboo's hand and starts running. He stumbles after her, off-balance and shaky, but she doesn't let them slow until they're well out of L'manberg and her own lungs are aching.

-

Techno glances at the clock, and nods to himself.

He gets out of bed and gathers clothes. Phil is quietly taking a nap in his bed, softly snoring, curled up below his own wings. It's good to see him actually sleeping; he's been obsessing over some book, barely speaking and spending most of his time in quiet study. He hasn't pressed on what it is

yet, he's sure he'll tell him soon enough.

He gets dressed and climbs down the ladder. Niki messaged him just a bit ago that they're not too far away.

He's going to meet them.

Tommy is awake. He's sitting on the edge of his bed, reading a book.

Techno grabs his cloak, and secures his sword at his waist.

"Tech?" Tommy asks, looking up from his book. "What're you doing?"

He clasps the front of his cloak, fingers twitching. "Goin' out for a bit."

His brows furrow and he puts his book aside, crossing his arms. "You're not supposed to be doing that."

He glances back at him, observing his frown and his firmly concerned eyes. "It's important," he explains. "I'll be safe. I made some promises, and I intend to keep them."

Tommy gets up from the bed and glances at the ladder. "Does Phil know you're leaving?"

He fiddles with the gold-and-emerald clasp. "...no."

"So you're sneaking out. To do... what, exactly?"

Techno laughs a little, kind of inappropriately, because he can really tell that Tommy's teenage years were heavily influenced by their eldest brother. "I'm goin' out to help some friends of mine."

His eyebrows raise. "You don't *have* friends."

*Yeah, very Wilbur.* "It's Ranboo and Niki," he explains. "Just... I'll be back. It won't be long."

He stares at him, eyes narrowed, critical. "Why are you going to go help Ranboo and Niki?" He asks, glancing at the door now. "It could be a trick." There's a new note of paranoia in his voice; he must be having worse nightmares...

"I got a call from Niki," he says, but now Tommy put that anxiety-inducing thought in his head.

Niki and Ranboo could be working against him. He's hesitant to place too much trust in anyone for that reason. But Niki's worry sounded genuine, and she said that Ranboo was branded a traitor... and half-blinded. He doesn't think this is a trap.

*She needs help*

*Trust her*

*Ranboo is hurt*

*Need to help*

***Need to protect***

The voices are... usually right. Most of the time.

"I told her I'd help her if she needed it, and she asked me. I'll be fine. Besides, I'm getting your friend." Techno adjusts the laces on his boots and pretends his chest doesn't still hurt a significant amount. The skin has healed, but there are still *very* broken ribs on the inside. Ouch. "If Phil wakes up, tell him I'll be back in a bit."

Tommy looks at him with pure brotherly annoyance in his eyes. "...I can't really stop you, but I think this is a bad idea. You're still *healing* , Techno."

He gives a sarcastic smile. "I *know* . I'll be careful."

He leaves the house. The sunset is just fading, and the air is still. He has no idea if it'll snow tonight, with spring around the corner, but he's not going to let them walk like that.

Within minutes, he's riding over the snow on Carl, clutching the reins and watching the sky darken.

-

Ranboo has been trying his best. He really, really has. He wants to get to safety more than anything, and he doesn't want to make this any harder for Niki.

But his strength is flagging, and he's still vaguely light-headed from blood-loss. His feet won't listen to his brain and he's almost fallen countless times.

"It's okay, Ranboo," Niki soothes, resting her hand on his back. "We're getting close." She has her eyes on her comm's screen, inspecting the coordinates. "Just a bit longer?"

He nods. He keeps stumbling in the snow— his twisted ankle from his last time is bothering him, and his breathing is shallow, and his unbalanced sight is difficult to adjust to. He can barely see anything.

He can feel Niki's anxiety, biting into the edges of his mind. She's scared he's going to fall and she won't be able to help him. She's scared monsters will get them. She's just... anxious.

He can hear thoughts, too. Other endermen, lurking around. Warning, worrying.

*Danger, little one. Watch out. Be careful.*

Niki has blood on her hands, curled around his own.

He trips over a snowbank and roughly jerks himself upright before he lands in the dark snow. He's in enough pain without the burns. Niki steadies him, worried chirps leaving her mouth as she tries to calm him.

His eye *hurts* . Every slow beat of his pearlescent heart makes it throb, and even the brush of his hair against his bandages makes it worse. His vision blurs even on the good side from the pain. He wants to curl up and cry and *sleep* , but... not yet. Not yet. They have to get to the cabin.

He has no idea why Techno is going to let them stay, but he's in no state to question it. He's lucky that anyone is offering him safety, at this point. The people he thought he could trust turned on him. It *hurts*.

A zombie groans somewhere off to their left, and Ranboo's head raises to try and catch sight of it. His fingers fumble with his sword.

"Hey, let me take it," Niki says softly, batting his uncoordinated hands away from the weapon and pulling it from his belt. "I'm pretty okay with a sword. Don't worry."

"Okay," he agrees weakly, hugging himself. He's cold. So, so cold. Why does Techno live in the snow, anyway?

*Because it makes it harder for people to get to him.*

That makes sense. He likes to be alone, he's gathered.

*It wasn't hard enough. You still figured out where he was and then they drugged him and dragged him to his death.*

Does his mind really have to go into self-hatred mode when he's already in so much pain? It seems unfair.

Niki abruptly moves in front of him and slashes the sword at an approaching figure; he can't see what it is, but it makes a loud noise when it dies. Her wings spread out, brilliantly blue and black ( *gold and white* ) feathers shimmering in the bright, rising moon. He watches her with idle interest.

Is this how Techno felt after the execution? He probably felt worse, actually. But Ranboo could feel a level of exhausted delirium coming from him then, and he's feeling a bit of that now, too. And the fear of falling into the snow and dying there. That's also there. He doesn't want to die in the snow.

"C'mon," Niki says softly, tugging at his hand again. Obediently, he follows, steps shuffling.

Above them, a crow caws. It's way too loud in Ranboo's overwhelmed ears, so he covers one of them.

They walk in silence for a while. No monsters get too close after that first one, despite the darkness. Maybe better prey is out. Maybe they're scared of him; that's happened before, he's so baffling in terms of being a creature that some mobs just. Avoid him.

Whatever the case, Niki doesn't have to kill anything else.

He can't even feel the damp fabric of his pants clinging to his legs, soaking the soft fur and already damaged skin. He's so tired and fuzzy-headed. The only thing keeping him going is Niki's hand in his, the persistent cold, and an insistent, single-minded desire to *get to safety*.

Something is running through the snow, towards them. He catches the sound before Niki does, his ears perking up a little, dread sinking down his spine.

This is it. They're not going to make it to the cabin. They're going to die out here and they're going to respawn at home and Ranboo is going to be imprisoned for something that isn't even a *crime* .

He feels tears well in his eye and drip down his cheek, stinging even more in the cold.

The running footsteps-- hoofbeats, yeah, it's a horse of some kind?-- pause, and a familiar voice speaks.

"It's a bit too late to be walkin', isn't it?" Techno's tone is incongruently light.

"It is," Niki agrees next to him, squeezing his hand.

Ranboo blinks, uneven and confused. He's swaying in place and can barely see the horse, Techno atop it, something like a smile on his face.

"C'mon, kid. Up here."

Ranboo's limbs move without his input, and before he knows it, he's climbed up onto the horse's back. The bag he's been careful to hold onto this whole time is taken away and he can't even

complain.

His arms are guided to wrap around Techno's body, and he has enough sense to cling onto him. He somehow ends up burying his face in his soft, known-to-be pink hair. He smells like lavender. Lavender is so nice. One of his favorite scents.

"You sure you're okay with flyin'? It'll start snowin' soon enough." He can barely decipher the meaning of Techno's words, but he can feel them, and that's soothing, the rumble of his chest and the vibrations of the words. He's so warm, too. That makes sense, actually. He's a Nether hybrid. But the warmth is good, it thaws him a little bit and he holds him tighter.

"I'm okay," Niki says, distant. Why is she so far away? He wants her to be near him. She keeps him safe.

He whimpers a little. Techno pats his arm, and he can faintly feel a bit of... concern? Affection? come from him. It's the same feeling he's felt from him when he's around Tommy.

*He cares about you*, something in him says. And it's ridiculous, the idea of Technoblade caring about him when he's caused the man so much grief. But it feels so perfect and comforting, filling him with warmth as if he's standing in a sunbeam.

Maybe he cares? Maybe.

He buries his face further in his soft hair and squeezes him tighter.

And then he's not aware of anything but the movement of the horse and the warmth from Techno's body.

-

Niki lands wrong, and she has no time to catch herself before she falls into the snow.

She curses into the raised collar of her coat as her left wing screams with pain-- the wind bent it and it *hurts*-- and the right tingles with familiar numbness. Her back aches down to her ribcage and she feels tears drip down her cheeks. She's tempted to just stay in the snow, because at least it eases the hot pain she feels.

"Hey," Techno says softly, just to her left, and she raises her head a little. He's crouched next to her with a faint smile, just visible in the dim light of the lantern on the porch. "Need some help?"

"Where's Ranboo?" She asks instead of answering, looking up at the cabin. She's never been here, and it's... nice. It looks homey and warm. Really, really warm.

"Already got him inside, he's warmin' up. Tommy's with him." His hand gently rests on her shoulder. Even that light pressure makes pain spark down her spine, and she groans. "I can pick you up, if you need me to. You can't be too heavy."

Weakly, she pushes herself up into a sitting position on the cold snow. "Didn't you... break a *lot* of ribs, barely half a month ago?" she asks, shaky.

He tilts his head, still smiling. "Yeah, but if you need help... I mean, I already carried the kid inside."

She laughs weakly, and pulls herself up to her feet. Her wings scream with pain and she has to bite her tongue to keep from joining them. "I'm okay. You might need to help me up the stairs, but I'm

good to walk.”

“Alright.” He takes her arm and steadies her as they climb the stairs. She can feel the warmth coming from the lit windows and warm-hued wood, and she shivers in her borrowed coat and wet clothes.

When she steps inside, she practically melts at the warmth filling the room.

Niki slips off her coat, shaking her wings to try to get the numb feeling to go away despite the pain it causes.

The room they’re in is densely decorated, with multiple books and shiny, mostly-gold knickknacks filling the large bookshelf on one wall, a roaring fireplace on another with a boarlike skull and photos above it, a couch covered in blankets and pillows, an armchair that’s much the same, and plenty of decor on the walls as well. A bed layered in blankets in a roughly circular shape is in the corner near the small kitchen area, which is mostly clean other than mugs on the counter.

Ranboo is on the floor in front of the fireplace, his face buried in Tommy’s shoulder and a content purr leaving him. The younger boy is holding him in a tight embrace, wings draped around him and his hand stroking his hair, letting out little chirps as he holds him.

The sight makes her eyes well with tears, but they’re good ones, this time. She’s more than happy that he’s okay, that *both* of them are okay. Ranboo had told her that Tommy was alive, of course, but she hadn’t-- she hadn’t really been able to believe it until now.

At least they’re okay. Ranboo is hurt, and Tommy is presumed dead, but they’re here and okay.

Techno touches her shoulder and nods towards the fire. “Go sit down, you’re freezing. I’ll get you something warm to drink.”

She blinks, tears rolling down her cheeks, and nods weakly. “Right, yeah. Thank you.”

The rug in front of the fire is warm and soft, and she runs her hands over it when she’s settled on her knees.

Tommy glances over Ranboo’s shoulder and gives her a small smile. He looks... older. His birthday is soon, if memory serves... and he’s probably been through a lot since she last saw him. “Hi, Niki,” he says quietly. “Are you okay?”

She smiles back and reaches over to pat his shoulder, avoiding the fluffed feathers of his wing. “I’m alright,” she says, voice trembling a bit from pain, no matter how hard she tries to mask it. “I’m so happy to see you’re okay.”

He smiles a bit wider. “Me too,” he says, leaning his head against Ranboo’s and letting out a small chirp when he tries to cuddle in closer. “Ranboo, I have-- *ow* . I have *ribs* . Please don’t break them, you’re so much stronger than you look.”

She laughs, weaker than she expected, and wipes her eyes. Ranboo purrs louder and curls himself up impossibly small against Tommy, as if trying to completely hide.

Techno comes over with a pair of mugs in his hands, and sits down between her and the boys, legs crossed. When he hands one over to Niki, she can smell fragrant herbal tea, and the warmth from it makes her hands tremble. She holds it close to her chest and sighs.

“So,” he starts, somehow very neutral. “What happened, exactly?”

Ranboo whines loudly. Tommy winces slightly as he apparently squeezes him again, but he makes a calming noise and scratches behind his ear, trying to soothe him a little.

Niki takes a small sip of her tea, staring into the fire. “I... I don’t know everything,” she starts, hesitant. “But I know a bit. Apparently, Tubbo stole Ranboo’s memory book, he writes down a lot of important stuff in it... and he wrote stuff about *you*, and the execution...” she trails off, looking at Ranboo’s nervously flicking tail. She brings her wings in closer to try and warm the aching limbs.

Techno fiddles with the leather braces around his wrists, black claws loosening and tightening the laces. “Can’t imagine he had anything good to say about that,” he mutters, bitterness in his voice.

Ranboo turns his head just enough so his face isn’t hidden in Tommy’s shirt. “He called me a traitor,” he says, entirely too rough; Niki is a bit surprised he’s able to speak English right now, she’s seen him this upset before and had to try and decipher the warbles of the enderman language. “I didn’t... I wasn’t trying to do anything *bad*, I was just trying to help you. I d-don’t know why...”

Tommy’s face has gone dark, and his hands are simply resting on his friend’s back now. His blue eyes don’t shine with tears, there’s no kind of shine in them at all. They look... dead. Flat.

Niki bites her lip and sets her mug down, instead hugging herself. There’s still blood under her nails from when she stabbed Quackity, and she can still hear how his bones cracked. She didn’t know she was... *capable* of that.

“How did you get stabbed?” Techno asks, a little too blunt. For some reason it makes her laugh, pulling at the collar of her sweater.

Ranboo shrugs a little, making tiny, worried sounds to himself. “He... Tubbo lead me to this alley, and told me everything he found out... h-he said it was a punishment, a-and he stabbed me in the eye.”

Tommy’s eyes become far more dull, and he withdraws his arms from around Ranboo. He whines again, and it gets louder when he completely pulls away and stands up. “I...” his voice is a croak. “That... why would he do that? It’s so...” His wings are drooping, and his lip is trembling. He hugs himself, fingers digging into his arms.

Niki hugs *herself* a little tighter.

“I’m a traitor, a-and... I guess that’s how they d-deal with that, now.” Ranboo looks small, despite his height, slumped and curled into himself, ears low and tail wrapped around his legs.

“Are you okay?” Techno asks, glancing up at his brother with soft concern on his face, brows furrowed.

(Something about that expression reminds her of the wild-haired fourteen-year-old he was when she first met him, the one who had barely mumbled a *hello* to her before hiding behind Philza. He was older than her, but he looked even more small and awkward than she was.

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” she had commented to Wilbur, when they were sitting on the porch. “He seems sweet.”

“He’s a brat,” Wilbur said fondly.

Every once in a while, Niki would see him for more than a moment. Sometimes, when she came



over, he'd be at the kitchen table, furiously writing in a notebook. On even rarer occasions, when she asked him what he was writing, he'd tell her.

"I'm writing about a king being overthrown by the people he's oppressed for fifteen years," he told her once, gold eyes sparkling and his smile a little mean.

"That sounds very interesting," she said genuinely, and Techno's eyes had widened, his expression clearing to be replaced by shock.

"...really?" he asked, soft. "You-- um. You can read it, whenever it's done. If you want."

She smiled, giving him a brief touch on the back. "That would be nice, you'll have to tell me when you finish it."

His ears folded down and he laughed nervously, scratching out a misspelled word. "Y-yeah, I will.")

Without a word, Tommy walks to another room-- she sees through the briefly open door that it's a bathroom-- and closes himself in.

Techno sighs quietly and his shoulders slump slightly. He scratches the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry," Ranboo says, his tone fully miserable. His tail wraps tightly around one of his legs, disturbing the fabric of his pants-- Niki can see the burns on his skin, the blood matting his fur. "I didn't-- why do I keep d-doing this...?" He snuffles, and tears drip down his cheek.

"You didn't do anythin' wrong, kid," Techno assures, reaching over to pat his shoulder. "Tommy's just... he's dealin' with a *lot*. Probably doesn't help him to have to cope with the fact that his best friend is goin' off the deep end and goin' around stabbin' people." His own tail flicks; how has Niki never noticed it? It's long and tipped with pink fur, lighter than his hair. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

Niki shuffles closer to Ranboo and takes his hand. He squeezes it tightly and she doesn't even complain when his claws dig into her skin, just a little. "It was horrible," she murmurs. "I'm sorry too, Ranboo."

He snuffles again, the tears coming faster, and hides his face in his free hand. Her heart aches, the rage from before filling her with hot, vicious feelings that seem at odds with her strange grief for him. She wants to hurt the people who hurt him, which is absurd, because they're all *hurt*, damaged people too. She doesn't really *want* to hurt them, but... she wouldn't be *opposed* to it.

She'll think more about it in a bit. When Ranboo is asleep, probably.

"Here, drink this. You're still freezin', I'll get you a blanket." Techno presses the second mug of tea into Ranboo's hand, and he takes it obediently, taking his other hand from hers to hold it better.

He gets up and grabs two blankets from the couch, and passes one to Niki, while he carefully wraps the other around the teenager's shaking shoulders. She unfolds the one she was given-- it's the same blue-and-white pattern as the rug underneath her-- and drapes it over her lap, keeping her legs warm. It's a soft, *soft* blanket, aged and fuzzy. She likes it.

"Are you hurt, Niki?" Techno asks, still standing. She can see the slightest hint of pain on his face, the twitch of his brow and his lip, and her heart feels hot with gratitude and bizarre guilt.

This man just went through a traumatic if botched execution, who knows what his mental state is like, and yet, he took the two of them in without question. She feels so lucky yet so guilty.

"I'm not really hurt," she lies, shifting her achy wings. She gives up on trying to hide her pain when Techno frowns at her obvious wince. "...my wings and back are pretty sore, though. I... I'm not the best with flying, they're pretty weak."

He gives a thoughtful hum, tail swaying. "I think... hold on a sec," he walks to the kitchen and rummages through a drawer, before pulling out a small, very nondescript jar.

"Here it is. It's not much, but a while ago I figured out how to make a balm out of magma cream and cloves and peppermint, which... sounds ridiculous, but it... really helps with pain." His smile is awkward yet sincere, and he sits down next to her with the small jar. "It'll mess up your feathers, they'll get all greasy, but if you rub it on your back, it might help." He fiddles with it, smile fading a little. "...if you think it'll help, of course. We ran out of actual painkillers a while ago."

Niki can't help her small giggle, because he's obviously trying so hard to help her, and it makes her feel warm inside despite her pain. "I'm willing to try anything, honestly. I can't really reach my back, though..."

He raises his brows. "You helped me with my shattered ribs. If you don't mind, I can put it on your back."

She laughs a little more, nodding her head. "Yeah, I don't mind."

Tommy comes out of the bathroom, eyes red but his expression much calmer. When he sits back down, he lets Ranboo curl up against him again, a little looser. "Sorry," he says, voice hoarse. He's obviously been *crying*, and it makes her heart twist. "I just... n-needed a minute."

"It makes sense," Ranboo acknowledges softly, leaning into his shoulder as he sips from his tea. "I'm sorry, too. I just... it was so awful..."

He exhales heavily. "Y-yeah, I can imagine." He stretches out his wings briefly, and drapes the right one around Ranboo gently. "We're good now, though."

"Mhm," he agrees. "All good."

Niki bites her lip, and takes the last drink of her tea. Techno gestures her towards the kitchen, and she follows him, sitting down at a small table. There's candles at the center, half melted, and an empty glass at one of the places.

He stands so she's mostly shielded from the boys. "We can do this here, or in the bathroom, if you want. You'll have to take your sweater off, so..." His cheeks are the slightest bit pink, and it's ridiculous enough that she wants to laugh.

"Here is fine," she says, reaching around to undo the buttons at the bottom of her grey sweater, freeing her wings, and pulls it off over her head, disrupting her ponytail. Her hair is all clumped together from being wet, and it feels heavy.

She turns so he can reach her back, and she's surprised by how gentle his hands are when he touches her skin. "Where does it hurt, exactly?" He asks. "I don't want to get it everywhere."

"It's mostly my shoulders, and... along my spine. It's okay if you get it on my feathers, I'll just clean them up once I feel better." She winces when he touches her shoulders, but laughs a little when he immediately draws his hand back. "It's okay, I'm just sore. You can touch."

“Alright,” his tone is hesitant.

When he opens the balm, the sharp scent is enough to make her sneeze, and he snorts a small laugh.

When he rubs some of it on her shoulder, very gentle, it almost feels like nothing, before a pleasant, tingling warmth sinks into her skin and muscles. It’s heavenly, unraveling the hot pain and making the shoulder feel more loose within moments.

“Oh,” she sighs. “That’s *amazing* .”

He chuckles. “Yeah, it’s pretty great. I made it to help with my hands, they’re... *garbage* , and this stuff is pretty great. I need to make more sometime.” He spreads the balm along her other shoulder, and between her wings. He’s very careful with his claws, and she’s grateful. And despite her saying it’s fine, he tries to keep it off her feathers. The gesture is appreciated.

Things fall quiet, save for the murmuring from Tommy and Ranboo, and the distant tick-tock of a clock.

By the time her aching back is completely covered, Niki is having to hold back happy chirps, and she feels entirely warm.

“There you go. It won’t stain your clothes, so you can put your sweater back on.” Techno closes the jar and puts it away again, going to wash his hands in the kitchen sink. She’s never really seen him in a... *domestic* setting, and it’s both strange yet fitting. He’s dressed down to a flowy white top and loose black pants, and his hair is tied up into a low ponytail. He looks... relaxed.

She pulls her sweater back on, rolling her shoulders and sighing pleasantly when not even her bra makes her back hurt. “Thank you,” she says while she does up the buttons, and then stretches out her wings. “For everything, really. Letting us stay...”

Techno dries his hands on a towel and leans back against the counter with a light smile on his face. “I mean... I said I’d help you. I trust you. Couldn’t tell you *why* , but I do. And I’d feel really bad if I just abandoned Ranboo.” He huffs softly and glances over at the kids. “I have a soft spot for the kid.”

“I can tell,” she says without thinking, and he gives an abrupt laugh. “I was so surprised when he told me he came out here to see Tommy a few times, and you *let* him. And when you let him help you home...” she laughs too, her mouth spreading in a smile against her own will. “I’m glad you trust me. And I’m... glad you’re okay, after what happened.”

(She’s never had nightmares until this server. Techno’s execution has neatly fit itself into the rotation.)

His smile fades a little, and he rubs his side briefly. “Yeah, I’m... pretty okay. Not gonna say it doesn’t still hurt like hell, but... I’m still pretty okay.”

Something clatters just above them and to the left. Niki goes tense, her fingers twitching towards her knife.

Techno glances over at a ladder mounted on the wall. “About time you woke up,” he says, tone carefully calm.

Philza climbs down the ladder. She hasn’t seen him in... a while, and she’s definitely never seen him this disheveled-- his hair sticks out at odd angles, the feathers in his wings are hellishly

ruffled, and he's blinking with distaste at the lit-up living area. He's in his pajamas, apparently, a green bathrobe open over loose pants and shirt.

"...why are there other people here," he half-asks, glancing between Niki at the table and Ranboo in front of the fire, purring loud enough for everyone to hear now.

"Things happened, they're stayin' here now," Techno sounds amazingly calm. "Do you want coffee?"

"Yes," Phil says, before looking at his son and frowning. "...did you go out?"

"Mhm," he says, already focused on starting a pot of coffee.

For a brief moment, Phil looks like he wants to protest-- Niki understands now that the situation was not cleared with him, and it's kind of funny-- but he ultimately decides to just yawn and accept it.

"It's good to see you, Niki," he says, voice a little thick with sleep, and pats her shoulder as he passes her on his way into the kitchen.

She smiles, unable to help it. "Nice to see you too. And... sorry for just showing up."

"It's Techno's house, so I don't mind. He has to deal with whatever happened."

"You're only sayin' that because you can't ground me anymore," Techno mumbles.

Niki giggles.

For a moment, everything feels okay.

## Chapter End Notes

this is not related to snow au or mcYT but if you want a view into what makes jaybird go brr go watch fear of depths by jacob geller on yt. i watch it every time i write and it kills me it is the *best*

i feel like this is. paced oddly. but who cares, you're here for the Feelings.

we might get. more fluff. or maybe i will hurt you again next chapter. who knows!

also: i read all the comments!!! sorry for not replying!!! if you have any pressing questions/compliments you want me to reply to, you can send me an ask on tumblr; i always answer those ;o;

# how the most dangerous thing is to love

## Chapter Notes

does a gay little dance THE FIRST FIC IS FINISHED WOOOO POG!!!!!!! thank you for sticking around through all the nonsense! i developed this fic as i went along and it's a straight fuckin disaster but i hope y'all had a good time.

this is just a chapter to wrap some stuff up! address some things! the second fic,, should be started sometime soon :-)) not to overshare too much but i am depressed and have fatigue+chronic pain issues, so sometimes i just don't. have the energy lmao. but this au means a fuck ton to me so hopefully i can get it out sooner rather than later.

warning for some references to child abuse (specifically in ranboo's part) and also a discussion about like. wilbur's death. it's all kinda heavy and it made me sad but in a fun way.

so! with that said! i hope you like the last chapter, and thank you for reading <3

chapter title from achilles come down by gang of youths

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A month passes with nothing serious happening.

It's almost spring. You can hardly tell, out here, but Phil is grateful for it all the same. There are no flowers, but the air is warming marginally.

Techno's ribs are on their way to healing. He's able to be out of bed and more active consistently, and he's seeming a bit more... stable.

(He's more fragile and on-edge than ever, though.

One morning, Phil dropped something and he flinched back so hard you would think he struck him.

"You okay?" He asked softly.

Techno gave him a cautious glance, eyes wide, ears down. "Yeah.")

Niki builds herself a small house near the cabin. They all help her, and it's... it's nice. It feels normal, and fun, and it gets all of them to smile.

They build furniture and buy things for the house in the nearest village. They spend long hours outside, sweating despite the cold.

By the time it's done, they're all exhausted, but pleased. Niki bakes a cake to celebrate, and it's the happiest they've been in a while.

("Ack-- Tommy! You got frosting in my hair!")

"That's kind of the point!")

They build another room onto the cabin, one for the kids.

“Are you sure you two wanna share?” Techno asked, before they began. “You don’t have to.”

“I know,” Tommy said lightly, holding Ranboo’s hand. He’s taken to doing that, to help the boy around while he adjusts to his lack of sight on one side. “We both sleep better with somebody around.”

So they build the room and paint the walls and move beds and place decor, and things are okay.

Things seem to be calming down, if only for the moment.

The whole time, the heat of secrets and plans and guilt *burns* at Phil’s throat.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” He asks one evening, when only he is awake, a bit dubious. “It’s not going to be easy.”

“I want it,” Ghostbur says seriously, as seriously as he’s ever heard him. “Whatever it takes. I *need* to be alive again.”

Phil sighs, feeling too old for this. “I’ll get together what we need, then.”

It’s not going to be like last time.

-

(unbeknownst to him, there’s a spirit following him.)

-

Tommy’s stomach sweeps with uneasy nausea as he stands on the edge of the porch railing.

If he can’t fly, it’s no big deal. He’s still healing. It’s been, what, just over four months? He hasn’t been healing very long. He’s fine!

It’s just...

His birthday is soon.

He would like to be able to *fly* by his birthday. Phil said he should try, that he thinks it’ll be good for his healing, to build up strength.

He stretches out his wings in the cool almost-spring air. It brushes through his feathers and numbs the pain that still twangs the broken one.

But they both stretch out properly.

He swallows.

Before he broke his wing, he could take off from the ground. But stepping off an elevated surface should help his body remember how to fly.

(The last time he flew in any meaningful way, barring the day his wing was broken, he was carrying Tubbo. It was... after Wilbur died, but before their fight. He finally trusted him to carry him, and...

“Oh, woah,” Tubbo breathed, arms wrapped tightly around Tommy’s neck. “This is... is *this* why you take flights at night a lot?”

“Mhm,” he agreed. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...”)

He shakes his head to dismiss the memory.

*One, two, three.*

He steps off the porch.

For a moment, he’s terrified that he’ll just plunge into the snow like an idiot and probably cry about it.

His wings catch the air, stretched wide, and with one harsh (kind of painful...) stroke...

He doesn’t hit the snow. He doesn’t at all. His shoes skim it, but he manages to—

To—

To fly. He’s *flying* again, pushing himself higher and higher with powerful beats and the rush of the wind in his ears.

He’s flying.

A hysterical giggle rips from his throat and he jerks in the air as he hugs himself, wings still working.

It hurts and he’s going to be sore and he’s kind of crooked because he’s relying more on his right side, but he’s flying again.

Below him, on the porch, he’s being watched. It’s not unpleasant at all; he can feel the warm weight of Phil’s proud gaze even from the air. Techno is watching him, glasses on, but he can’t discern his emotion yet. And Niki! Niki is watching too, sitting on the railing, and he can feel her smile. Ranboo is next to her, shadowing his gaze with a hand. He’s sure if he was close enough, he could hear him letting out little happy vwoops.

And Ghostbur.

Well, that puts a tiny bit of a damper on things. The ghost of his older brother is staring up at him, fluffy wings spread, and he’s laughing, he can hear it.

*Oh well*, Tommy thinks, turning in the air and making a loose circle of the house, enjoying the wind under his wings and the sting of cold on his cheeks. *He’s not going to ruin this for me.*

He’s smiling so hard his cheeks hurt.

He flies around aimlessly for a while. He loves how the world looks from up high. The trees look small and when he dives down to touch them, he can brush the tops of them with his shoes. The air feels like freedom and he’s a little drunk on it. He hasn’t stopped giggling and smiling.

When Tommy finally lands, he stumbles, legs shaky with the memory of being in the air finally felt again. He throws his arms and wings out to counterbalance himself, still laughing.

“That was amazing!” Ghostbur calls. Ranboo and Niki agree, and Techno gives a lazy salute of appreciation.

Phil gives him a proud smile and hurries down the porch steps to hug him. He doesn’t even think of flinching away, instead wrapping his arms around him tightly in return.

“You look so happy,” he says, squeezing Tommy closer, and his smile only gets wider.

His wing is sore and he didn’t even fly very long, but he *can* , and that’s what matters.

-

Techno blows over the surface of his coffee as he settles in the armchair. Coffee does little for his energy, but it does make him calm down a little, and that’s good.

He’s been especially nervous as of late.

Two days ago, Tommy saw a figure lurking in the darkness, too stealthy and swift to be a mob.

Techno hasn’t slept well since.

It’s mid-morning. Everyone is awake, up and about, and it’s. Nice.

He had cast off all hopes of having a true family again a while ago.

And yet, here he is, watching his little brother ramble at his friend (or brother? His feelings on Ranboo are complicated, but he’s sure Tommy sees him as family now) and their father cleaning up the kitchen. Even Ghostbur is there, sitting on the counter, gleefully humming along to the song Phil occasionally starts whistling.

Niki is next to him, on the nearby couch, reading a book. Her own cup of coffee is empty on the sidetable, and her attention is taken by the thriller. He’s amused by how her wings twitch when she’s startled by a plot twist.

He doesn’t regret trusting her, yet. Having her around has been nice. Her presence is comforting, they can talk about books and writing and art, and she asks questions in a way that doesn’t feel like prying.

(“Where did you grow up, anyway?” She asked one evening, while he was sewing the boys’ outfits. He swore her to secrecy about it.

He pushed the needle through the thick fabric. “The Nether, mostly. Remember it more than anythin’ else, at least.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “That sounds... scary. How old were you when you got out?”

“Mm, a bit over seven? Around that. Got in there when I was almost six. Spent about two years there, but it felt longer. Time’s weird there.”

She made a scandalized noise, wings flaring out slightly. “Why were you in the Nether as a little kid? That’s so dangerous... where were your *parents* ?”

The memory of the housefire made him prick his finger. “They died when I was young.” His tone got a little cold. “What about you?”

And she gratefully changed the topic.)



Anxiety still plagues him, despite the calm morning. Not just because of the stalking figure Tommy saw, but because... he thinks Phil is planning something. He doesn't know what, but it's something about his body language and how he talks, lately.

He has a *plan* .

Techno has a distinct feeling that he's not going to like it.

The kitchen sink turns off. He sips from his coffee and glances at the boys, still rambling at each other, meal all but forgotten. Tommy has been smiling a lot more since he's been able to fly again. It warms his heart, just like the small improvements to Ranboo's ability to cope with his damaged sight and his general comfort level around them.

(He still seems terrified, and apologizes often. He keeps his head down and doesn't touch anyone but Tommy and seems permanently poised to run.

He takes any chore given to him without complaint, even ones that clearly hurt him-- like washing the dishes, a mistake that Techno has been cursing himself over for a week now.

"It doesn't matter if I get hurt," he said, too genuine, white-and-green eyes bright. "It doesn't hurt too bad. And you asked me to do it, so I did."

When Techno was quiet for too long, he frowned and his hands twitched where he was trying to dress the small burns. "Did I... do something wrong? Are you upset?"

"I'm not upset," he assured him. "I just... you don't have to do things that hurt you. I should've thought about it first."

He scrunched up his face. "I said it doesn't hurt too bad. I'm used to it."

*God, this kid is so much like him.*

"No reason for me to let you hurt yourself," he said with finality, wrapping a bandage around his palm. "Next time someone asks you to do somethin' that hurts you, say no. Even if it's me. Got it?"

He nodded, hesitant.)

The domestic scene is shattered when Phil dries his hands and says, "Alright. As soon as everyone is done eating, we need to talk."

Tommy looks up, alarmed. Techno doesn't show his surprise, but he's sure the flick of his ear is evidence enough.

"Niki, Ranboo, you can stay if you like, but I think it might end up being a little heavy." He's speaking with calm confidence, but the way he fiddles with the ring on a chain around his neck makes Techno's anxiety spike.

Ranboo looks up from his conversation with Tommy and his plate, mismatched brows furrowed, and cautiously shakes his head. "I think I'll stay."

Niki marks her page in the book with a slip of colored paper and sets it aside. "Same here." She clasps her hands on her lap.

Phil nods.

They all assemble in the living area, food handled, tensions rising.

Techno starts bouncing his leg and biting at the inside of his mouth.

“Okay,” Phil starts, and his voice cracks just slightly. “This isn’t going to be easy, for any of us. I have things to come clean about, and promises I need to fill.”

The vague wording makes him bite a bit harder, tasting blood on his tongue. He scratches at his wrist.

He doesn’t sit, he stands near the couch, near Ghostbur, who’s curled up on the end cushion. He runs a hand through his hair. It’s getting long again.

Techno suddenly wishes they could grow azaleas here, so he could place them gently in his hair.

“Techno,” he jolts when addressed, looking up at him with wide eyes. His anxiety is plain as day on his face, he’s sure; he’s become a bit more expressive after having a major breakdown. “You still don’t know how Wilbur died, do you?”

He runs his tongue over the small cut inside of his mouth, and glances at the ghost. “He was stabbed, right?” The blue stain down his chest seems oddly bright. (Fleeting, he’s glad he can actually *see* the color. Nether hybrids tend to be unable to see blue.)

“Yeah, he was.” Phil’s voice is weak, and *wow this whole thing is not helping his anxiety*. “But... that’s not the whole story.”

His stomach sinks.

Phil sits down on the couch and runs his hands into his hair again. Niki gives him a brief glance and rests her hand on his arm, squeezing lightly to comfort him.

“When I found him, he was in that little room with the button.” His voice has a haunted quality. “It was just him and that button and all these scribbles on the walls. The L’manberg anthem, he told me. He was... the minute I looked at him, I could tell he was so far gone...”

Techno smooths his face into indifference. He never knew any of this. Sure, he knew Wilbur set off TNT, but...

“I tried to talk to him,” Phil says, scratching the back of his neck. “I tried to tell him that this wasn’t the way to go, that this would just ruin everything, but— but he’s never really listened to anyone, even someone trying to help him. Even me.” He gives a rueful smile. “So he pressed the button. Everything went up.”

He heard the explosions as he was walking away from... *killing* Tommy.

(There was no intention. He’s never taken one of his family’s lives. He doesn’t think he has it in him.)

Phil leans back on the couch, rubbing his face now, eyes glimmering. “I grabbed him and pulled him close when the explosions went off. I tried to shield him, to make sure he wouldn’t get *hurt* .”

Techno glances at the ghost of his older brother-- on the verge of tears at the story of his last moments-- and his younger brother-- staring with a flat expression at his lap, hand intertwined with Ranboo’s own.

He meets Niki's gaze, glossy with tears, and she offers her hand. He takes it.

Phil takes a deep breath, and the tears that roll down his face make Techno's stomach sink ever further. He thinks he knows where this story is going.

He doesn't like it.

"When the dust was clearing, he.. he turned to me. He grabbed my hand." Phil stares at the floor. "And he gave me a sword."

Techno swallows.

"He told me to kill him. He *begged* me. Over and over, even as I tried to talk him down— he was so determined." He wipes his eyes and laughs weakly. "What other choice could I make? I was trapped in that little room, people were watching from where he blew it up, he— he was *begging* me. I had no choice." He chokes briefly.

Techno hasn't seen him so weak in a long time. It settles like something slimy in his belly, some unearthly beast made to cause discomfort.

He knows the conclusion to this story, now.

He feels cold with grief and loss and anger and an odd sense of betrayal.

"So I killed him," Phil says, voice choked. "I had no *choice* . I tried so hard to get through to him, but he didn't listen to a word I said. He just *begged* me to kill him, and— and..." he buries his face in his hands. "I *did* ."

Ghostbur hugs him, partially transparent form flickering. "It's okay," he soothes. "It's a happy memory for me now. It's what I wanted, then."

Something about his innocent, whispery voice stokes that odd betrayal and a simmering, hot anger.

"When were you going to *tell me*?" Techno asks bluntly. "It's been months."

Phil looks up at him, looking every bit as old as he must be. He sighs. "I... I was scared. You were already so hurt over his death, I didn't... want to make it worse."

"So you were just going to hide it." His voice is hard and cold and he knows it's probably not fair but *god how could he fucking keep this from him?* "Until when? Until I found out from someone else?"

He's well aware that his eyes are hot, tears welling on his lashes.

"Tech," he says gently. Techno physically flinches back from the soft tone. "I'm going to be honest. I probably never would have told you if it wasn't *necessary*. I didn't... I didn't want you to have to know that. It's bad enough everyone else does..."

*Selfish*

*Lied to you*

*The betrayal*

*Didn't want you to know what happened to your pack*

*Hurt hurt hurt*

Techno digs his claws on one hand into the cushion of the armchair. The voices are loud and that's a bad sign. His breathing is slightly uneven.

Niki rubs her thumb on the side of his palm. He barely feels it.

"You killed your own *son*," he says, and his voice betrays his rage. "And didn't think to tell one of his brothers the *truth*." A faint, vague memory from earlier in the winter sticks out at him, and he bares his teeth. "You told me *you didn't know*."

Phil pales. Ghostbur gently pats his arm.

Tommy hugs himself, making himself small next to Ranboo. The boy himself looks uncomfortable and startled, eyes as wide as plates.

Techno lets go of Niki's hand and stands up. He feels tense and uncomfortable and the anger in him is boiling and seething in some disgusting way, the calls of violence he's long been ignoring back and louder than ever.

*Lied to you*  
*Lied to you*  
*Don't trust him*  
*He lied to you*  
*Said he loved you*  
***Lied to you***

He needs to think logically. Phil was begged, cornered, pressured. He knows how unstable Wilbur was before dying.

But convincing his own father to kill him?

Would he ever even *try* that?

"Techno," Phil says, tone placating. He gets up from the couch and comes to his side. "I... I'm sorry. It was selfish of me not to tell you, but I just didn't want to talk about it, it was *horrible* ..."

He's crying. His guilt is obvious in every teardrop.

And yet, the voices plant the seeds of doubt.

*Not sorry*  
*No forgiveness*  
*Hurt him*  
*Inflict your rage upon him*  
*The axe is nearby*  
***The axe!!!***

He rests a hand on Techno's arm, in a gentle touch, but it makes him jerk away and let out a small growl, a warning sound. His head swims with anger and anxiety and grief.

He suddenly wants to heed the spirits and grab his axe. It would be easy-- for how strong he is, Phil is remarkably delicate. He could just... take it and *swing it just right and it would crack through his mostly-hollow bones like matchsticks, spilling too-dark blood and viscera* --

He swallows the rage, the fuzz that begins to cloud his mind. "I... need a minute," he mutters, walking to the front door and stepping out into the cold morning.

As the door closes, they begin to speak again. Both his family and the voices, rambling on and on.

It hasn't snowed since he swept the porch, so the stone steps are dry if cold. He sits down and buries his face in his palms.

*He lied to you*

*He killed someone you care about*

*Lash out*

*Tell him what he did wrong*

*Scream at him*

***Hurt him***

Phil killed his own son. His *brother*. The strong young man who built a country, who wrote music, who was so bright and alive even in madness.

He's dead and gone and a shell of himself as a spirit because of their *father*.

The tears come hot and stinging. He's cried more lately than in the rest of his life.

His heart hurts.

How is he supposed to handle this?

-

Tommy hugs his knees as the door slams behind Techno.

He got the sense that this conversation would be rough, but he expected Techno to last longer. He's been a bit more vulnerable since almost dying, though.

Ranboo pets his hair and lets out quiet little chirps as he does. He asked him what they mean once, and he explained that adult endermen use them to calm children. Like a lullaby.

It helps. Instinctively, almost, Tommy gets a bit less tense.

Phil dries his eyes and sighs deeply. "That's not even going to be the hardest part," he says quietly. "I'm going to have to convince him to let me do necromancy in his house."

Tommy blinks. Surely he didn't hear *that* right. "Necromancy," he says flatly. "As in... resurrection. Bringing a dead thing back to life."

"Yes!" Ghostbur says cheerfully. "I want to be alive again, so I can fix things."

Bitterness squirms in Tommy's stomach. Wilbur did a lot of damage, and while the ghost's optimism is *cute*, he's pretty sure that he won't be able to fix anything.

Wilbur is why he has a hard time taking up space. Being needy. Being weak and needing to be taken care of. Being a burden. Being *there* at all.

He's also why he flinches at breaking glass and the smell of alcohol.

(That wasn't all him. But the whole thing *was* his fault.)

"That's... is that even actually *possible*?" He asks, leaning into Ranboo's side.

"It's *possible*," Phil says, carefully neutral. He can note the hidden anxiety, though. "I haven't done

one in... a long time. The last time I tried..." he trails off briefly, darkness clouding his expression. "It didn't go well, unfortunately. But the odds are different, this time. We have a perfectly willing spirit, and that works better than a physical body..."

Niki clears her throat. "I already knew you killed Wil," she says, and her voice is gentle yet strongly emotional, "but I didn't know he forced you. I'm sorry." She squeezes Phil's hand. "And... yeah, resurrections are possible. I helped in one once." She gives a faint smile, trembling.

Tommy is so curious about that he could *die*, but he keeps on track. "Ghostbur, was this... your idea?"

The ghost nods. "Yeah! I found a book about it, and remembered a bunch of very nasty things that I didn't want to think about, but they made me realize I want to be alive again! So I can help make things better." He gives such an innocent smile that his eyes burn.

"That... would probably be good," he says, trying to sound calm.

Ranboo hums. "Resurrections are dangerous, though. If you don't do them right..." he trails off, looking at Phil, brows furrowed. His tail flicks. "They can damage you. *A lot*."

*Stop saying vague things that make me curious!* Tommy wants to scream. Why did he never get into magic?!

Phil gives a weak smile. "Yeah, they can. But it's worth a try."

Ghostbur lets out a happy chirp, but it's... just slightly not right. Tommy's chest hurts a little.

("Shh, shh. You're sick, lay down," Wilbur pet back his hair as he laid him back in bed. "You're alright. Just relax, Tech's getting medicine right now.")

Tommy whined. "My head hurts..."

"Yeah, I know," he gave a small smile and rubbed his thumb along his hairline. "You'll be alright, I promise. You just need some medicine and some rest."

He leaned into the touch, still whining. Wilbur chuckled and kept petting him.

After he was given medicine and tucked into bed, he sat at his bedside with his guitar and played something quiet, humming along.

Humming turned into quiet, nonsensical vocals, and then to chirping, birdlike and gentle. It was just quiet enough not to hurt Tommy's aching head.

He fell asleep to those familiar sounds.)

He hugs his legs. "How do we do it?"

Phil sighs, rubbing his neck. "It's... to resurrect someone, you need to replicate how they died. There's more to it, but that's the most important part..."

Techno comes back in the door. His face is pink from the wind and his eyes are shiny and red.

He goes back to his chair, sitting down heavily. His hands are trembling.

Silence settles for a few minutes.

"I'm... sorry," Techno says, carefully. "I think that I... get why you didn't tell me earlier."

Tommy wasn't surprised when Phil hadn't told him the truth. As highly as Techno holds him, that might just ruin everything. But if resurrection involves replicating a death... he needs to know.

"I should have told you anyway," Phil says, a little bitter. "You deserved to know before now. I'm sorry for saying I didn't know."

He shrugs. The line of his shoulders is strong below his blue sweater. "I probably would've lashed out if you told me before..." he waves vaguely at all of them. "I had some *character development*."

Tommy smothers a snicker in his hand. Niki giggles. Ranboo makes a noise that sounds like pure nonsense but is still comforting.

"So... well. That's not the only thing we need to talk about." Phil sighs, fiddling with the ring on his necklace.

Ghostbur smiles widely. "I want to be resurrected."

Techno snorts dismissively. "Really." His tone is sarcastic and a bit mean.

He doesn't seem to notice. "Yes! Like I told Tommy, I want to come back to life and fix things. I was so mean and cruel to... a *lot* of people, but especially you two! So I want to make up for it!"

Tommy has to hold back a deep, deep sigh. Again, the optimism is cute.

But.

Things aren't that *simple* .

"I morally object to necromancy," Techno mutters. "Dead things should *stay dead* ."

"Well, you do a lot of things you morally object to, mate." Phil raises his brows at him, disapproving. Techno gives an unkind laugh. "I won't make you be involved if you don't want to be. But..." He slumps a little.

Niki stands up, brushing off her legs. "I don't think it will work," her voice is strong but not unkind. "Resurrections are too risky. They're possible, but..." she glances between all of them with a cautious smile. A smile that says "you have no idea what you're getting into".

"We'll be careful," Ghostbur assures her, leaning forward and smiling up at her. "We're going to be as careful as possible. We're ready to take the risk!" He grins now, showing off his very, very bright white teeth.

"We are," Phil agrees.

Techno makes another dismissive noise and gets up as well, taking his empty coffee cup to the kitchen. "I'll help you, because I'm sure you'll need it, but I agree with Niki. It's dangerous."

Tommy glances up at Ranboo, who's been very quiet. His expression is unfamiliarly dark, and he's looking at Phil with deep curiosity. He can see how strange his eyes are, round irises with no pupils narrowed into thin slits as he looks at him. Even the damaged side does that.

He nudges him lightly with his shoulder. He jolts and looks down, eyes widening again, back to normal.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly, taking his hand.

“Yeah. Just... thought I noticed something.”

-

Niki runs the brush through her hair, in fluid movements.

“I want to be resurrected.” Said so cheerfully by the morbid ghost of someone she once loved and cared for.

Resurrections are dangerous.

She can remember, at the tender age of thirteen, assisting her parents as they tried to resurrect a fallen friend of theirs.

They did not succeed.

It was probably why they stopped paying attention to her, wrapped up in grief.

Not that they paid all that much attention to her before.

She sighs. Her wings twitch-spasm with pain and she frowns, rolling her shoulders.

Living here is... different. Niki feels far less *alone*-- because for the last few months, she had felt a low, simmering fear that venturing too far from safety was a bad idea and as such barely spoke to anyone-- but there's another odd detail to it.

She's part of a... family, now. They listen to her, even on small things. Nobody ever listens to her, not even her own family when she was younger. She offers suggestions on how to do something better, and they're taken into consideration. They just... seem to *care* about what she has to say.

Techno smiles at her, tension fading from his shoulders while they talk about one of the books she borrowed. Tommy invites her to go on walks with him (“I did, like, nothing for three months, I need exercise!”) and lets her fuss over his wings. Phil seems to accept her presence as easily as he accepts that of his own children, unconsciously including her when he calls for them, offering her the same kindness and fond exasperation and occasional absent affection. Ranboo seems more than delighted with her being around all the time, enthusiastically helping her with her house and talking about things that bother him in a way he doesn't with anyone else.

Even Ghostbur isn't horrible to be around. He seems... *genuine* , at least. He's sweet.

She accepted the fact that the Wilbur she knew and loved is gone with as much grace as she could.

Which brings her back to the issue at hand.

*The resurrection .*

She finishes brushing her hair, and looks at herself in the mirror.

She looks... tired. There are purple-blue dark circles under her eyes and her cheeks look hollow.

She sighs and sets the hairbrush down. She pulls her hair up and goes to get dressed.

She can't stop the resurrection, but she'll be there to help. If they need it.



She feels like they'll need it.

-

Ranboo is coming to know how to handle his empathic abilities.

He's learning things about it-- how each person's emotions have a slightly different edge to them, even if they're feeling the same thing. Happy feelings can be just as choking as sad feelings.

And everyone here carries so much pain.

Even in little things, he can just feel how they're carrying it around like a physical weight.

Techno sits by the fire and braids his hair, and Ranboo can feel a layer of grief woven into the locks of his hair. (Some of his hair seems to shimmer a shade of gold.)

Phil carries firewood inside and something dark and shapeless, guilt maybe, is settled atop the stack.

Niki's wings seem to be held down by the same sadness that makes her face look hollow.

And Tommy... being around Tommy is strange. Sometimes, the feelings he gets from him are sharp and cruel, sadness and anger and pain. Sometimes, they're soft like flower petals, happiness and affection and amusement.

He likes it, though.

Adjusting to having people around that he kind of... trusts, is weird. Last time he trusted people, they quite literally stabbed him for it. So... understandably, it's nervous.

He's going to be as good as possible, though. He's not going to give them a reason to be mad at him, ever.

He does whatever chores he's given without complaint. He makes eye contact and tries to suppress the little noises he makes when he's feeling any emotion at all. He sits on the floor instead of in any of the chairs, so he's not too tall.

He doesn't touch anyone but Tommy (and Niki, sometimes), because they haven't said it's okay and he doesn't want them to hurt him for it.

He doesn't think they would, but-- but he's playing it safe.

(When he was small, though he can't quite remember how small, he crawled into bed with whatever people he was living with then, because he had a nightmare and he was scared.

As soon as he tried to curl up against his 'father', he had been seized by the wrist and dragged out of the room, the man spitting insults and pure venom.

"It's bad enough that I have to keep you in my home," he spit, "You're not getting in my damn bed."

So Ranboo went back to his room-- not much more than a storage closet with a haphazardly made bed-- and never tried to touch them again.)

(One night, he dozed off on the couch, and ended up resting his head on Techno's shoulder. When he wakes up, he jolts back and scrambles to the other side of the couch.

“It’s fine,” he said, calm as ever. “You weren’t botherin’ me, kid.”

He didn’t risk it.)

He likes their new situation. He likes the snow even when it burns him, and the clothes that Techno made for him keep him so warm all the time.

And it just... feels good. Even with the pain they’re all carrying, they’re all happy.

(This is what a normal family feels like. Not dangerous or scary. Warm, happy. Loving.)

And then they talk about the resurrection, and some things click into place for him, in regards to the dark, powerful energy around Philza.

He’s performed a resurrection before. More than one.

And he’s been in the End, as part of it maybe. He can practically smell the dust of endstone and the citrus-adjacent scent of chorus fruit around him.

(It provokes an odd longing in him.)

He’s not mortal. He’s been around immortals and similar beings before, and that’s what he feels like. Not completely *immortal*, he’s sure he could die, but it would take a lot.

*If he’s already like this, how is resurrecting his son, someone he has such emotional ties to, going to affect him?*

The concern and fear he feels for him must be how everyone feels when their family is in danger.

But he’s not sure he’ll be able to stop it.

All the magic is going to give him a headache.

## Chapter End Notes

HOO BOY i hope everyone's ready for resurrection arc. it's gonna suck for everyone!  
:-) i have to up the rating, so. get ready for dark shit, lmao.

follow me on tumblr and watch me slowly die like a plant without water

## End Notes

follow me on tumblr under the same username!

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